



Lovestruck
Prince! I'll Fight
the **Heroine** for
My **Villainess**
Fiancée!

Shakushineko

Illust. by Yukiko



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Lovestruck Prince! I'll Fight the Heroine for My Villainess Fiancée! Volume 1

Shakushineko

Illustration by Yukiko

Editing by Shana Vodhanel

Proofreading by A.M. Perrone and Charis Messier

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My fiancée whom I'm deeply in love is almost made to be a villainess, so the heroine side will be paid for what they did. Volume 1

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Lovestruck Prince! I'll Fight the Heroine for My Villainess Fiancée!

Duke's Daughter

Elizabeth La Montlivere

Gets framed as the villainess from the novel Star Maiden. She respects Vincent, but believes their engagement is solely political.

Crown Prince

Vincent von Weissworth

A true talent with both pen and sword, this perfect prince on the outside is head-over-heels for Elizabeth on the inside.
Does everything he can for her.





Baron's Daughter

Yulisse Merrifield

Shares the same background and looks as Star Maiden's heroine. Tries to ruin Elizabeth to get herself a seat on the throne.

Count's Son

Harold Abarakoff

Vincent's maternal half-brother. Serves as his aide, bodyguard, and excels at spycraft. He's an icy man who only smiles once a year.

Marquis's Son

Raphael Marshall

A certified mage and potential future aide to Vincent. A talented playboy and sadist. Gets close to Yulisse to uncover the Star Maiden's secrets.

Prologue: My Fiancé Dumped Me... Right?

“I won’t tolerate your selfish misdeeds a minute longer! Elizabeth la Montlivere, consider our engagement broken!”

Those words—the same as in that horrible novel—echoed throughout the hall. In the middle of a ball at the Royal Academy, no less, and all eyes were on me and the crown prince now.

“I’m not sure I understand,” I replied.

Crown Prince Vincent shook his head. “How could you not? You know full well what you’ve done to poor Lady Yulisse.”

“I haven’t done a thing.”

Thinking back on it, that was my biggest mistake. I’d avoided Prince Vincent and Lady Yulisse as best I could to prevent any rumors.

I never expected His Royal Highness to fall victim to that book, too.

I’d noticed him reading it with great fervor, but I paid it no mind. I’d assumed he was exhausted from studying and wanted to lose himself in a story.

His Royal Highness, Vincent von Weissworth, was a true talent with both pen and sword. He had his father’s flaxen hair and sapphire eyes and his mother’s noble facial features. Some people even called him a miracle, a gift from the gods themselves. Our engagement was for political reasons, but I truly believed he was worth devoting my body and soul to—until now.

Lady Yulisse Merrifield was at Vincent’s side, a look of terror on her face as she watched me. I grew dizzy as the scene unfolded exactly as the plot decreed.

I must be dreaming... Someone cursed me to have this horrible nightmare. This can’t be real.

I stepped on my foot, digging in my heel under the lacy folds of my gown.

Ow.

Come to think of it, I'd received no small number of protections after becoming His Royal Highness' fiancée, and Vincent himself had an even stronger Ward than I did. I couldn't imagine anyone would be able to brainwash him or control his actions. This was real, then. He was breaking off our engagement of his own free will.

Of all the misfortunes that could befall me, why this?

"I'm afraid I'm in no position to accept that," I replied, determined to buy even a little time. "Without both His Majesty and my father's consent—"

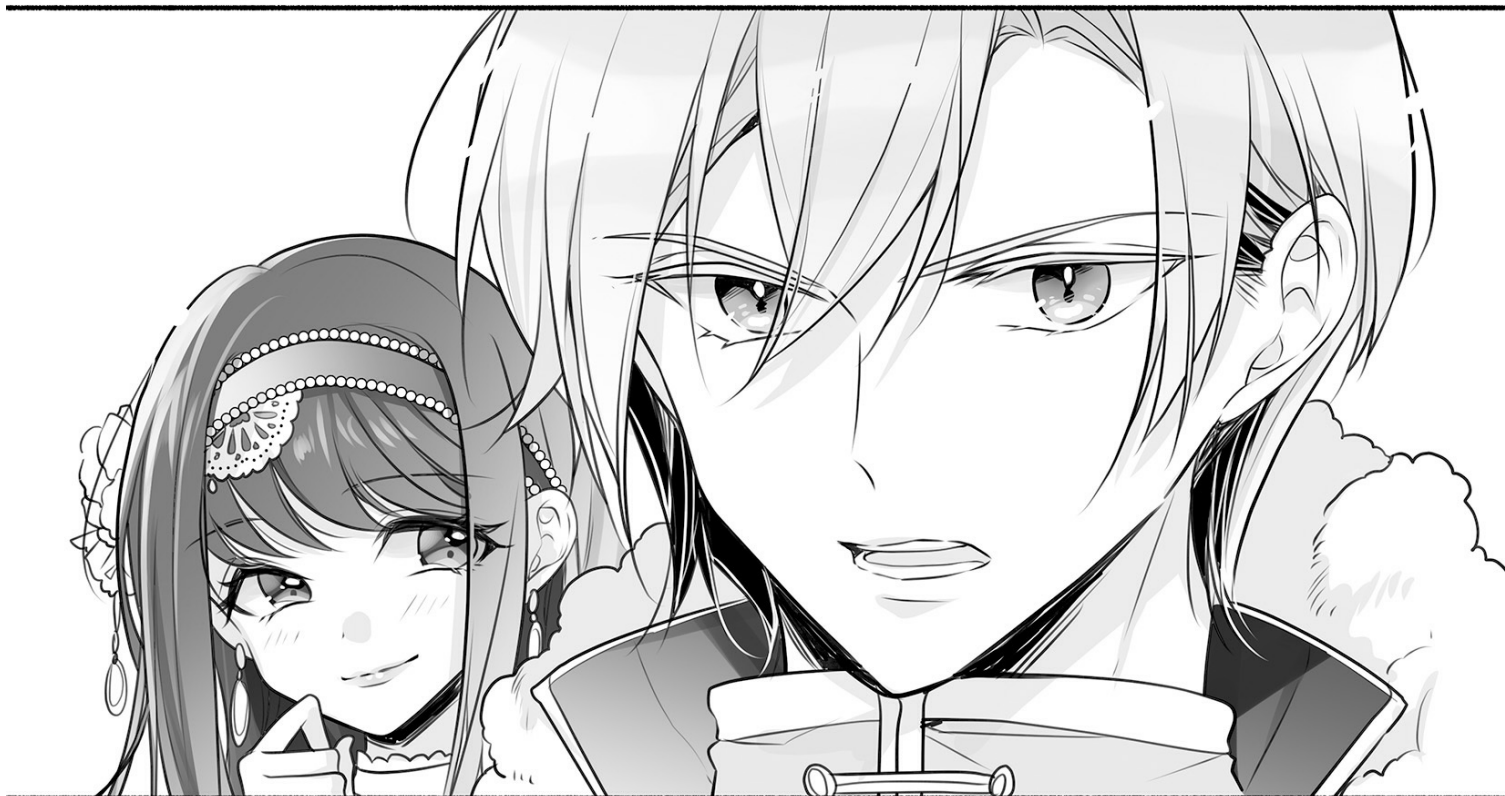
"I have it," he cut me off. "Father gave me explicit permission to announce it here."

His Majesty did?

If that was true, then House la Montlivere and our entire family were bound to collapse in on ourselves.

What would we be without His Royal Highness?

My blood ran cold, and I grew faint. Through my wavering vision, I saw the so-called heroine, Lady Yulisse. She was still making herself small at His Royal Highness' side, apparently bewildered by this recent turn of events. When our eyes met, however, everything changed. She *smiled*—a confident little grin, as if she were genuinely enjoying herself. Only I could see it, and it was like looking into the eyes of the devil herself.



“No...” I whispered.

I had been deceived. Blood rushed to my head. I was unfit to be queen. I was a fool to do nothing but swat away the embers that clung to the hem of my dress. If I truly wanted to protect the realm from those who would manipulate the kingdom for their own gain, I had to put out such fires.

The shock was enough that I started to black out. I lost my sense of balance, collapsing.

At that moment, a voice rang out.

“Freeze like the image in a mirror!”

A strong arm caught me around my shoulders before I hit the marble ballroom floor.

“Sorry for putting you through that, Liza,” came his warm, familiar voice.

“Prince Vince...”

No one else called me that. His soft fingertips brushed my cheek, and when I opened my eyes, he was smiling at me, just like always.

Behind him, Lady Yulisse’s smirk was frozen, as if by magic.



THE novel that started it all was published not long after Prince Vincent, Lady Yulisse, and I enrolled at the Royal Academy. Though literacy was a privilege that the average commoner was deprived of, it was reprinted again and again, to the point that they supposedly had to recarve the printing blocks. Everyone had heard of it, and it was recommended eagerly to anyone ignorant of its contents. No novel had ever been that successful, and no future book could hope to match its success. It was the one and only *Even the Stars Cry Upon the Holy Maiden*, or *Star Maiden* for short.

It was about a poor peasant girl. Blessed by the night sky, she discovered she was the long-lost daughter of the local baron. She was taken into his family and sent to the Royal Academy to study, where she breathed new life into the stuffy nobles’ traditions. Her humble, rustic charms won the hearts of many a young suitor, and eventually her pure heart attracted the favor of the Crown Prince

himself.

Rags-to-riches tales had been told time and time again without anyone so much as batting an eye. Everyone had their own lot in life, and no peasant could become a princess, but it spoke to a common dream. Even I could empathize with that. I could easily understand it becoming popular even within the Academy's walls.

Every story requires conflict, however. The crown prince in *Star Maiden* had a fiancée—the daughter of a duke who was a spoiled, selfish young woman. She detested the heroine for her common roots and bullied the hapless girl at every turn. Throughout the first half of the story, the duke's daughter and her clique pestered her endlessly, but the heroine only continued to garner support from her fellow students.

The issue was that the crown prince's fiancée had to be referring to me. The villainess of this tale even had my same hair and eye color, and the prince's description matched Vincent perfectly. The author drew attention to that every chance they had.

Perhaps they only meant to allude to present politics, but I had a difficult time enjoying the story once I realized I was the antagonist. I also disliked how it portrayed the prince as a dimwit. He was described as only feeling motivated to study and become a good king after falling in love with the heroine, but Prince Vincent wasn't that shallow. He'd been studying diligently for years before stepping foot in the Academy. Why, it was little better than slander—but my thoughts on that could wait.

In the novel, after a trying but enjoyable first year at the Academy, the prince confesses his love to the heroine the day before the Coming-of-Age Ball. Then, when he witnessed the villainess' cruelty towards her at said ball, the prince denounced her crimes and broke off their engagement. Once her misdeeds were laid bare, the villainess was abandoned by her family and exiled from the kingdom. The heroine, on the other hand, was wed to the prince and received the blessing of every commoner and noble in the land. That conclusion made the author's intent painfully clear.

Vincent and I matched our counterparts in the story perfectly, and by

supposed coincidence, Lady Yulisse was the daughter of a baron out in the countryside and had the same midnight blue hair and eyes as the heroine. Our schoolmates noticed the similarities quickly, and people often confused the story for reality, expecting me to lash out against the poor, helpless country girl.

I exercised the utmost caution as I tried to live an ordinary life. Likewise, Prince Vincent neither antagonized her nor fussed over her. He treated her as he would any other classmate. I pointedly avoided both of them and even asked my friends to make sure Lady Yulisse had no complaints about her life at the Academy. Every precaution was taken to avoid making waves and keep all three of us out of the spotlight.

At the last possible moment, however—at said Coming-of-Age Ball—the passage I'd feared for the longest time became reality, though I still couldn't imagine how or why.

Apparently, though, His Royal Highness has some sort of a plan in place to take care of this...



AFTER the events of the past year flashed through my head, I came to my senses and caught myself, standing on my own two feet.

“My apologies, Your Royal Highness. Thank you.”

I gently pushed his arm away, distancing myself. Engaged as we were, it was hardly proper for a lady to be so close to a gentleman in public. He readily removed his arm from around my waist but clasped my hand in his, determined not to let go.

I knew it... Something about him is off, isn't it? Could this all be a dream?

Just in case, I dug my heel into my other foot. It hurt as much as I'd expected.

Around the ballroom, everyone except for Prince Vincent and myself was frozen, still as statues. The spell he'd cast must have blanketed the entire hall. I was impressed that he had affected so many people at once, but it also made my skin crawl. It was as though I had wandered into a wax museum.

I shot Prince Vincent a look, bidding him to undo his spell, and he understood

my intent.

“I’ll return you all to normal in a moment,” he spoke loudly to the room. “But first, consider your expressions.” He looked straight at the devilish smirk on Lady Yulisse’s face, then surveyed the rest of the hall. “The truest measure of nobility is keeping one’s emotions hidden. Those of you who turned a blind eye to these troubles are truly deserving of your titles. But the rest of you, especially you in the front...”

When I looked at the students, I realized he was right. Everyone bore one of three expressions on their face: excitement, disappointment, or apathy. The ones closest to us—no doubt those most enthralled by Lady Yulisse’s act—seemed beside themselves with excitement. Edward Norden was especially pleased, frozen before a cheer of joy.

I must admit, I never thought him to be such a fan of Lady Yulisse.

“You’ve confused fiction for reality,” Prince Vincent continued with an air of finality. “You are slow-witted at best and ignorant to the harm you cause others at worst. Consider yourselves fortunate that your parents aren’t in attendance; else you would receive the scolding of your lives. I sincerely hope you will reflect on this whole affair.”

His point made, he snapped his fingers, and everyone started moving all at once. The low hum of chatter echoed throughout the hall. Some stayed paralyzed, disturbed by their recent actions. Others let out sighs of relief, and a few students who were closest to us tried to blend into the crowd. They no doubt had plenty to think about. I, for one, was amazed at how eloquently Prince Vincent had struck at the heart of the matter.

Lady Yulisse slumped to the ground, like a marionette severed from its strings. Her face was a mask of rage and resentment.

Prince Vincent looked down at her coolly, speaking in a low voice. “Lady Yulisse. You were smiling at Elizabeth’s discomfort, weren’t you?” He let out a short sigh. His tone was resolute. “Elizabeth, how did that make you feel?”

He didn’t face me as he spoke. No doubt he knew exactly what I had felt. His question was for everyone else to hear. For the first time, I understood why he chose the ball for this decisive moment, just as the book had described.

“I thought that us separating, no matter the circumstances, would be disastrous for the kingdom,” I said in a clear, resonant voice.

Lady Yulisse shot me a baffled look. She likely expected me to feel defeated or frustrated at having lost to her. That wasn’t my concern, however.

“If you had meant those words,” I continued, “then either House la Montlivere would have fallen, or you would have lost your inheritance and right to the throne—perhaps both.”

Lady Yulisse’s eyes flew open, and the color drained from her face. “What...?!”

The thought had never crossed her mind. In other words, she had never wanted Prince Vincent from the beginning. Her goal was to be queen, nothing more.

The prince shook his head at her. “Your accomplice no doubt told you that you would become queen should I choose you, but you were deceived. Could any precocious upstart take the throne on such a whim? Could any mere lovestruck fool do it? No, impossible. The best you could achieve is eloping with me into exile. You never had a chance at the throne.”

“B-But that’s... That’s not fair!” Her voice, once like a songbird’s chirping on a spring breeze, was now hoarse and frail. For the first time, she spoke words of her own instead of mindlessly reciting that book.

Prince Vincent’s expression was firm. “That’s *reality*.”

The entire room was tense. The spell that novel had held over them was broken, and they remembered their noblesse oblige all at once.

“Why...?! So this was all pointless?! What was it all for?!” Lady Yulisse’s wail broke the spell. Her shoulders shuddered, and large tears spilled from her eyes. Even I felt a pang of pity for her. She was likely nothing more than a tool for the true mastermind, naively led to believe her life was a fairy tale.

“Your Highness?” I whispered into Prince Vincent’s ear. “There are too many people here. Perhaps you should finish this later?”

He cast his gaze towards the door, and a handful of soldiers and ladies-in-

waiting came forward. They wordlessly urged Lady Yulisse to her feet and led her away. Her will had been shattered; under questioning, she wouldn't be able to cover for her deceiver. At best, she would be tried for sowing discord and, at worst, for treason against the Crown.

It was strange to think that a mere story was the start of it all, and most everyone had forgotten the gravity of such crimes. Prince Vincent had used Lady Yulisse to remind the future lords and ladies of that harrowing fact, and most of them now looked at His Highness with a mix of awe and respect—myself included. He himself was unwavering in his resolve as he watched Lady Yulisse be carted out of the room.

If anyone has ever truly deserved to be king, it's him.

He no doubt had plans to catch the mastermind as well, and I was overcome with unease that I would ever be able to match him at his side.

“Liza,” he said, turning to face me. “As an apology for this whole ordeal, allow me to gift you anything you desire. Anything at all.”

“O-Oh, no, I couldn't possibly accept! If anything, I should apologize to you for handling this affair so ineptly. You've taught me what it is I lack.”

With that, the hit novel *Star Maiden* returned to fantasy and became nothing more than a story once more. Only one lingering question was left unanswered.

Why did His Highness seem so distant when I looked up at him?

Chapter 1: A Story Set in Motion

LEAF-DAPPLED sunlight streamed into the corner of a lonely classroom, signaling the slow end of summer. I, Crown Prince Vincent, let out a sullen sigh as I watched the verdant treetops sway.

“They’re all *such* idiots,” I muttered to myself.

“Prince Vincent, might I suggest you avoid telling such truths in public?”

“Of course I won’t.”

“If you say so. I was simply concerned as to the overwhelming veracity of your words, to the point where I grew afraid you would utter them whenever you had the chance.”

I huffed at the speaker, my maternal half-brother, as he bowed deeply in a manner more sarcastic than I would’ve thought possible.

He never minces words, does he?

As much as I hated to admit it, though, he was right. I could let something like that slip, especially since this mess was on my mind every waking moment and occupied my every dream.

I let out a deep, frustrated sigh and ruffled my hair like mad.



“I should be with Elizabeth right now, showering her with the affection she deserves!” I lamented.

“One can always dream.”

“I’m being serious!”

I clenched my teeth and whipped around to glare at him. He was a handsome young man with deep ashen eyes and heavy eyelids, his silver hair swept back with perfect precision.

Dammit... Does he think he can insult me with his good looks?! And how dare he be taller than me?! Such insolence!

Classes were over, and we were killing time before returning to the palace. It made me sick, wasting my scant free time with him. I’d seen enough of his face for a lifetime.

“Don’t those nobles have anything better to do than put on those idiotic plays? I should have them all arrested for insulting royalty. Wouldn’t it be far more entertaining if they threw themselves into a nice dungeon cell?”

“If they agreed, the plays wouldn’t be so profitable.”

“Don’t play coy, Harold. *Think*. You agree with me, right?”

Harold shrugged and shook his head.

I let out another sigh. I’d been sighing so often lately that I barely breathed normally anymore. In a feeble attempt to patch my wounded heart, I pulled out my pocket watch and flipped it open. An intricately detailed image of Elizabeth was engraved on the inner lid, as she appeared at the Commencement Ball several days before. My countless other similar pocket watches were safely stowed away at home.

That emerald-green ribbon goes with her golden curls so well... She’s so charming, so mature! Ah, Elizabeth!

Harold didn’t have to hear my thoughts to shoot me a look of disgust. “If Lady la Montlivere could see you now, she would be positively repulsed.”

I shook my head sadly. “No... I bet she wouldn’t even care.”

“Oh, Your Highness...”

His voice was laden thick with pity, and irritation welled up within me.

The worst thing was, I was right. Elizabeth didn't give a fig about me. If she knew, she'd probably just nod and carry on with her life. *“Of course you have a picture of me, we're engaged,”* she would say, and she'd never think of it again. She never stopped to consider that I loved her, idolized her, and worshipped the very ground she walked on. To her, we were partners in a dance of politics, nothing more. She was faithful to her role in life to a fault.



WE first met when I was only eight years old. I knew I had a fiancée, but she was nothing more than a name before my birthday party that year. To be frank, I didn't want to meet her. I had no grasp of my duties as crown prince whatsoever at the time. I'd sneak out of my classes on the norm and goof off until Mother caught me, and I often regretted being born a prince. I was convinced that my fiancée would be a hard-eyed and critical woman just like Mother.

I could not have been more wrong. No, her beauty was more exquisite than the best doll-maker in the land could ever hope to replicate, and while she spoke little, her violet eyes bore an iron will within them.

“It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Prince Vincent. I am a daughter of House la Montlivere, Elizabeth. I still have much to learn, but I look forward to making the kingdom a better place at your side.”

She met my gaze with eyes like fine crystal, pinched the folds of her skirt, slid one foot a half-step behind her, and dipped low in a curtsy, raising her chin in perfect coordination to not so much as rustle her pristinely kept hair. Despite not being more than eight years old herself, her curtsy was perfection.

I was unable to say a thing in return. I couldn't remember a word of what I was supposed to say. All I could do was blush bright red and stand stiff as a board. Luckily, Father greeted her in my place. Throughout the whole exchange, Elizabeth maintained that posture without so much as a sway in her limbs or a tremble in the tiara or flowers perched in her hair.

I was lovestruck. Absolutely devastated. I spent the entire night crying alone in my room. There was no way a girl like her—an angel bearing my fiancée’s name—would ever fall in love with a boy like me. Grief consumed me. That was when I realized that love at first sight was real.

After that day, I put my heart and soul into becoming a man worthy of her affections. My parents were beside themselves with joy, and no doubt they knew my sudden change of heart was due to meeting Elizabeth. I begged my Father to have the best painter in the realm make me a picture of her, and in exchange, I caught up with my studies in the blink of an eye.

I had my tutors beat manners into me until it was second nature, and then I plunged headfirst into the politics, economics, and other arts of rulership of my own volition. All of it was for Elizabeth. Every second of my life was dedicated to when I would be king and she my queen, so that she would never have to lift a finger.

However, as our engagement was political and the lives of a crown prince and a duke’s daughter were both overbearingly busy, we were lucky to meet once every few months. Every time I laid eyes on her, she only grew more beautiful, and my love for her grew stronger.

I counted every passing second until the Commencement Ball, where, at the age of fifteen, I would finally be able to study alongside her at the Royal Academy. Even my free time was dedicated to her, and I studied harder than ever before. If my grades dropped even slightly or if there were ever any issues in my personal life, my time with her would be at risk. I had to act swiftly, be perfect, and crush any problem before it arose. I finished all three years’ worth of study before even enrolling, committed every possible manner to memory, and was prepared to make the most of three golden years with her.

That was when that horrible, vile, inexplicably cruel “romance” novel was published.

Even the Stars Cry for the Holy Maiden, or Star Maiden, was the tale of a baron’s daughter who received a Blessing from the stars, her pure heart won over the prince, and the two lived happily ever after. It was a common enough plot that I could’ve pointed to dozens of similar stories over the years, but this

particular tale had a few twists. One was that the heroine married the bachelor to end all bachelors—the Crown Prince himself, and he was clearly written with me in mind. Not only that, the prince’s fiancée was a mockery of Elizabeth. That alone was enough to make it feel unnaturally real to nobles and commoners alike, and it sold with horrifying speed.

Ugh... The vileness of it all.

I read it myself, of course, and took careful stock of the drawings where the prince was with his fiancée. They were all in black-and-white and with enough liberties taken that the art looked similar to us, but not identical—asking an illustrator to draw us directly would’ve crossed a line.

The author had to have been conscious of the similarities, not to mention the allegations of slander and disrespect that would likely accompany it. I had Harold investigate the author, but they used an alias, and not even the publisher knew how to contact the author directly or their true identity.

Under most circumstances, a mere novel and a few rumors wouldn’t have been enough to get between the two of us, and I was more than willing to prove the strength of our bond. There was an inconvenient complication, however.

“Lady Yulisse Merrifield!”

As soon as I heard that wretch’s name echo down the hallway, I snapped to attention. The school’s resident celebrity, Lady Yulisse herself, stood surrounded by young ladies in the hall. Lady Yulisse’s dress was modest in terms of decoration, but the ladies around her sported finely embroidered designs and plenty of lace. They had to be counts’ daughters at least.

“Don’t you think you’re being a tad too persistent?” one of them confronted her.

“Perhaps you aren’t aware how deeply Lady Elizabeth has been wounded by your slander?” suggested a second, sneering.

“And of all the brazen requests,” chided a third, “you would *dare* ask Lady Elizabeth herself for an introduction to His Royal Highness Prince Vincent?”

I blinked in surprise. They were talking about me. I exchanged a glance with

Harold before backing away from the door. They hadn't noticed us, and I wasn't about to kick the hornet's nest. It would be best for everyone involved if I left and pretended I hadn't heard a thing. At the sound of Lady Yulisse's voice, however, I froze.

"B-But I didn't mean to offend anyone... I only wanted to enjoy *Star Maiden*."

Oh? She wants to "enjoy" that slanderous tome, does she?

My interest must've shown on my face, as Harold shot me a scolding look. *Don't you dare say a thing*, his eyes said. Granted, I had a tendency to blurt things out at inopportune moments. He never said anything without good reason; his every action was measured as well.

No wonder he's worried, though. Lady Yulisse herself is the source of my every nightmare.

She was born to the daughter of a wealthy merchant and Baron Merrifield, and she had been raised as a commoner. Her straightforward personality and amiable honesty were testaments to that upbringing. Midnight blue hair and eyes were her most distinctive attributes. Just like the heroine of *Star Maiden*. Unlike Elizabeth or myself, her similarity was likely nothing more than a coincidence. Many nobles had a mistress or two, and such features were hardly rare.

The issue was that too many people assumed it to be fate. With her presence, the core cast of *Star Maiden* was assembled at the Academy. Even though two of those cast members were intentional, the novel was too much of a success for it to go unnoticed by gossip-hungry young lords and ladies. The impact was immense.

As a result, Elizabeth avoided me. She likewise avoided Lady Yulisse. She clearly intended to ride out the storm as quietly as possible, dashing my plans to grow closer to her. Whenever I bumped into her at lunch, she'd smile politely and disappear into a crowd of her friends. I couldn't force myself into a group of ladies, so I invariably had to take my leave.

My chance encounters with Lady Yulisse were worse—all eyes would be on us, excitement would fill the air, and I'd have to fight the urge to run for my life. What were they even expecting? The last thing I wanted to do was talk to her!

Luckily, she seemed to know how insulting it would be for a baron's daughter to address a crown prince out of the blue, and she never said anything despite all her sidelong looks. Eventually, she would get bored and leave, but she'd always be back with more pitiful glances and endless fidgeting.

A full month of that nonsense had come and gone, and the thought that it would continue was horrifying. By rights, I should've been giggling with Elizabeth over picnic lunches.

How dare Harold suggest it's only some dream?!

Given the ladies' words to Lady Yulisse, she wanted Lady Elizabeth to introduce her to me. I couldn't think of a more selfish, brazen request for the life of me.

"Do you even hear yourself?" one of the ladies huffed. "Have you any idea how deeply you're hurting poor Lady Elizabeth?!"

"His Royal Highness is *her* fiancé! Why should she want to introduce a sniffling little rodent like you to him?"

Say it like it is, ladies!

I wished they would pick up on Elizabeth's intentions and ignore Lady Yulisse, though. Anything but ignoring her would only put Elizabeth at a disadvantage. They likely wanted to emphasize and strengthen their ties with a duke's daughter who was engaged to the crown prince, for better or worse.

"B-But I... I didn't mean to..." Lady Yulisse's voice trembled, and she sniveled. The ladies, not expecting her to cry so easily, were shocked into silence.

Oh, drat... drat drat drat!

A headache was incoming. No noble worth their salt would wear their heart on their sleeve like that. It was natural to smile, of course, but not to show genuine happiness or pleasure. Anger or sadness were likewise taboo. Even when putting on airs or looking down one's nose at another, showing one's true emotions was unthinkable.

The ladies showed that manner perfectly. Tears, especially, were never allowed under any circumstances. They were an admission of weakness, of

defeat. Only a country bumpkin ignorant of every facet of high society, a truly uneducated fool, would dare do such a thing.

“I’m so sorry,” Lady Yulisse blubbered, tears streaming down her face. “I never... I never meant to...!”

The ladies exchanged guilty glances in silence. Cheering her up now would only worsen the situation, so they withdrew without another word.

As I shook my head in exasperation, I heard the sound of hard heels clacking haughtily.

“How dare you! What do you think you’re doing?!” cried a supposed gentleman as he burst onto the scene.

“Ugh... Not him again.”

Harold shot me a reprimanding look, but I waved him off. Our visitor couldn’t possibly hear me from our vantage point.

The voice was a deep baritone, fit for shouting down one’s sworn enemy on the field of battle. Its owner, Edward Norden, was a future count and the heir of the Norden bloodline, which was every bit as long and storied as my own. He was as proud and skilled a knight as any other in the realm.

His father was the Knight Commander, and the blood of warriors pulsed through his veins. The Nordens emphasized the martial arts as much as they did the fine ones and had a reputation for their overwhelming vigor. All his relatives were every bit as serious and straightforward as he was.

In other words, he was a simple-minded justice junkie with too much energy for his own good.

As soon as he arrived, any attempt at holding an actual conversation became moot. It seemed the story was determined to proceed, even without any work on my or Elizabeth’s parts.

Edward narrowed his eyes at the ladies. “You’re Lady Montlivere’s lackeys, aren’t you? Just what are you plotting?”

The ladies, taken aback at being called out so frankly, exchanged uneasy looks. None of them would dare announce their own house under such

circumstances, even though some of them might well outrank Edward.

Oh, how I wish I was out there... Elizabeth is a LA Montlivere! Don't you dare drop the definitive article!

"Have you no shame, ganging up on an innocent lady?!" Edward accused them. "Well? Nothing to say for yourselves? Perhaps next time, you should leave her be!"

He pounded the nail on the head, and still, none of the ladies dared speak out. They were looking for an excuse to slip away, I'm sure.

He swiveled about to face Lady Yulisse, I imagined with an air of indignation. His breath caught in his throat. "M-My word... You are?"

"My name is Yulisse Merrifield. My father, Baron Merrifield, holds South Windsor."

Even when face-to-face with a greater noble, she didn't hesitate to introduce herself. I decided it must be a moment's lapse of judgment after being saved. Strangely enough, her tears had dried.

Perhaps next time, you shouldn't cry! I could imagine Edward saying. His actual reaction took me off-guard.

"Oh, it's you!"

...What?

There was sheer joy in his voice, even.

"I'd heard the Star Maiden herself had enrolled at our fair Academy, but never did I expect to lay eyes on her!"

Um... Edward? Edward. No.

The Norden's devotion to the throne was second to none. That novel reduced *my fiancée* to the likes of a paltry criminal. He couldn't possibly enjoy that drivel. No, it was unbelievable.

"I've been positively entranced by your beauty ever since I first laid eyes on your pictures!" he enthused. "Allow me to introduce myself—I am Edward Norden."

“N-Norden...? As in, the Count Norden’s son?”

“Please, call me Edward. I assure you, Lady Yulisse, the pleasure of our acquaintance is all mine!”

He was clearly ogling her.

Can’t you tell the difference between truth and fiction?! Honestly!

Elizabeth’s groupies took their chance to retreat, but he didn’t so much as glance in their direction. Any noise they’d made by mistake was lost in his shower of pithy compliments.

“You wouldn’t believe the number of times I’ve read *Star Maiden*! It’s a classic, a true masterpiece!”

“Oh, I love that story, too! I’m so glad we share that love!”

Eugh.

I redirected my gaze out the window as Harold watched me with unconcealed pity.



THE next week, Edward and Lady Yulisse cornered me in an empty classroom, despite my best efforts to avoid them. Fortunately, Harold’s cautioning gaze was enough to keep me from grimacing at them, and I eked out a smile. I had to give them a warm welcome befitting a future king.

How dare you make me waste my smile! Do you have any idea how long I’ve practiced this for my darling Elizabeth?!

“Your Royal Highness,” Edward said with a low bow, heels clapped tightly together. “I believe it’s been some time.”

“Yes, it has been,” I replied with a composed nod.

While he was my senior, his family literally served mine. There was no need to show him undue respect.

Having finished with the formalities, Edward gestured to where Lady Yulisse hid behind him. “This is Lady Yulisse Merrifield. As you’re surely aware, she is the one and only heroine of *Star Maiden*!”

He still believes that book is real... If anything, his symptoms have grown worse. Poor man.

The way steam practically curled out from his nostrils to cover his salacious grin made me retch inwardly. Fortunately, neither of them took notice.

“What a pleasure it is to finally meet you, Your Royal Highness.” Lady Yulisse curtsied, but her angles were sloppy and unrefined. Even comparing her curtsy to Elizabeth’s would be insulting.

“The pleasure is mine, Lady Yulisse,” I said. “I’m sorry, I haven’t had the chance to read your book yet.”

After all, if it got out that I’d read it, I would have no choice but to seek out and punish the author in earnest. No doubt Elizabeth would reply the same.

Edward’s eyes nearly bulged out of his head, all tact instantly gone. “What a tragedy! Why, that book taught me what it means to feel for another, what love means! You must read it at once, I insist!”

“Hahaha. I’m very busy, you know.”

Besides, I don’t need that slanderous scrawling to teach me about love. I hope to build my own sense of love together with Elizabeth.

Hopefully, they would get the message and stop pushing me about it. In fact, I was hoping they’d leave me alone altogether. Not introducing myself was also a sign that I wasn’t interested in Lady Yulisse at all.

I’m not reading your book, and we won’t become friends, let alone lovers. End of story.

I turned to leave, but Edward stopped me.

“Please wait, Your Royal Highness! Poor Lady Yulisse has seen no end of troubles lately. Won’t you at least hear her out?”

Ugh. Can’t you be a little less knightly at times like this?

I stopped my shoulders from slumping or my smile from fading. I couldn’t leave. Turning back to them, I wordlessly urged Lady Yulisse to speak. She clasped her hands in front of her chest and gave me a pained look.

“You see, my notebooks and textbooks have been disappearing as of late.”

“Oh?”

It was a familiar line, and I couldn’t keep the interest from my voice.

She not only looks like Star Maiden’s protagonist, she even recites the character’s lines? This changes things.

“And you’re sure they aren’t simply lost?” I had to double-check.

“I’m sure. My things have been disappearing from my locker, and sometimes I find them in wastebaskets—or worse, torn to shreds.” She clasped a hand over her mouth as she recalled the pain, her eyes brimming with tears. Without a doubt, she looked just like the heroine, from her mannerisms to the smallest of details.

Edward placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “Someone must have discovered her identity and is tormenting her out of spite. You know what this means, don’t you?”

“No, say it isn’t so,” I replied flatly.

He nodded solemnly. “I’m afraid it’s true.”

Honestly, Edward, what are you saying? I have no idea what you’re on about. I’m not even supposed to know the first thing about the Star Maiden, let alone if Lady Yulisse is her or not. Are all fans like this? No wonder they waste so much time and money on those theatrical adaptations...

Harold watched our exchange emotionlessly. That was normal for him, but his eyes seemed especially dead now. His masklike demeanor and icy gaze helped ground me, and I resolved to thank him later.

Lady Yulisse looked up at me, a pathetic, plaintive look in her eyes. I pointedly averted my eyes, but furrowed my brow in pretend concern.

“I’m shocked to hear any of our students would be so cruel,” I said. “This is indeed a crisis.”

They both seemed convinced the situation was playing out as it had in the novel, and that some party had moved to torment Lady Yulisse in the exact same way. Elizabeth’s entourage were the most likely culprits, but Edward had

already directly confronted them. They wouldn't be so foolish.

It would've been all too easy to play along with their delusions, but I hadn't a clue what they might have in store for me should I do so. The safest option seemed to be to humor them while keeping them in front of me.

"Lady Yulisse Merrifield?" I finally said.

"Yes?"

I took her quivering hands and met her gaze. She was admittedly quite charming. Her large, clear eyes left a strong impression, and for better or worse, no noblewoman would ever be so frank with her expressions. I could understand why a passing knight might stop to lend her his aid.

I'm not so soft as to let her crocodile tears sway me, of course.

I shot Harold a sidelong glance, and he stepped forward to bow.

"This is my aide, Harold Abarakoff. Should you have any more trouble, you may consult him."

"I am Harold. I look forward to serving you."

"Oh... Thank you both so much."

She paused and let her eyes swim for a moment in thinly veiled disappointment.

Was she upset I didn't offer a more comprehensive solution? Or is there more in play after all?

"Isn't that great, Lady Yulisse?" Edward said with a grin, oblivious to the subtext.

"Well, I'd best be going," I said.

"Thank you very much for your aid!" he said.

I nodded at them as they bowed, then ducked into the hallway before they could stop me. My princely smile wouldn't last another minute.

Elizabeth was at a study group session with some of the other ladies. I'd been lingering after class in hopes of catching a glimpse of her as she went home, but I was too exhausted now to do anything but retire for the day.

Outside the Academy's gates, I boarded my carriage, and Harold sat opposite me. We waited until we were well underway and wouldn't be overheard to talk.

"Put a guard on Elizabeth," I ordered.

"Devolving into a stalker, are you, Your Royal Highness?"

"Oh, come off it. Who do you think I am?"

"A prince who's all too infatuated with his fiancée."

"..."

Bullseye, I suppose.

Nonetheless, I shot him a hard look to make it clear I was serious.

"Edward is one thing, but Lady Yulisse is highly suspicious. Did you hear how she didn't deny being the Star Maiden when Edward introduced her as such? Something more is at work here, and I fear Elizabeth may be in danger."

His brow furrowed. "To clarify, you're referring to the novel you've been endlessly insulting?"

"The very same."

"So you suppose Lady Yulisse will attempt to directly harm Lady Elizabeth? Is anything of that nature written in the book?"

I blinked in surprise. He had always listened to my complaints on *Star Maiden* without a word, so I had assumed he knew the story.

Was he ignorant of it all this time? Was he simply replying in the best manner?

"Haven't you read it?" I asked him point-blank.

"I haven't."

"Oh."

I'd never met anyone who'd honestly never read it before. The nobility had a social obligation to keep on top of cultural trends, so it was good to skim such things at least once.

"Read it, then. I'll lend you my copy," I told him.

“As you will.”

I resolved to give it one more quick read-through before that, just in case I had missed something. If Lady Yulisse had been duped into thinking she was the protagonist, then she was harmless, if naïve. Since others were getting roped into her delusions and turning the novel’s events into reality, however, I couldn’t afford to turn a blind eye.

I sighed as I gazed out the carriage window. The Royal Academy was in the heart of the capital, and the palace was a mere stone’s throw away. Since it was founded by the royal family, their children had the easiest access to its gates. The path from the Academy to the palace’s east gate was a secluded road lined with trees, cut off from the city at large. That said, it was still far enough that one had to take a carriage.

Dazzling sunlight pierced through the trees, and the sweet scent of flowers was ripe on the breeze, but my thoughts were elsewhere.

I wish I could show this to Elizabeth... No, I would settle for a glimpse of her.

I should have had a number of chances to talk to her by now. In the few months since school began, I estimated that I lost roughly an hour of time with her every day—that was nearly a hundred hours, gone forever. Wasted.

I’m not imagining it... I need release.

“Send a secret messenger to House la Montlivere,” I ordered Harold. “Ask Elizabeth what she thinks about coming to the palace this weekend for...a study session, I suppose.”

“As you will.”

I could’ve sworn he muttered something under his breath, but he nodded readily enough, so I let it slide. No doubt he could tell I was on the verge of snapping.

He’s a good man. I think I’ll keep him.



THE rest of the week dragged on for an eternity, but the weekend finally arrived, and Elizabeth with it. She traveled discreetly, but that only meant that

her carriage didn't bear the la Montlivere crest. Anyone with half an eye would still identify her visit, but given recent events, we felt no need to announce it so openly.

"It has been some time, Prince Vincent. Thank you for your most courteous invitation."

Elizabeth dipped into an exquisite curtsy. It was only a simple one—a mere bending of the knees and bowing of the head to show deference. Her dress was likewise charming and sported the latest design, but was by no means a formal gown. She was thus demonstrating that this was a private meeting, not an official function.

I smiled warmly. "Thank you for coming. I'm afraid I wanted to see you so badly, I couldn't help myself."

"We don't see each other often at the Academy, do we?"

No, we don't, and that should honestly be illegal!

She must have been every bit as lonely as I was. In a heartbeat, my broken spirit was mended, and I swore rose petals fluttered through the air behind her. If not for that infernal novel, we would be much closer by now. I didn't want to spoil the mood with such an unpleasant topic, however, and instead changed the subject.

"Our studies have perplexed me lately. I heard that you and your friends were holding study groups, and I hoped that you might be willing to teach me," I said.

"Oh, I don't imagine I could teach you much of anything! I must admit that working together with you sounds quite fun, however."

Both of our grades were quite high, and from the playful look in her eyes, she knew my explanation was merely pretext. All I wanted was to enjoy my time in her company, and with any luck, she would think more highly of me, perhaps even see me as a partner instead of a stiff, distant fiancé.

I escorted her out into the garden. Just as I'd hoped, it was sunny and clear, without even the slightest breeze. The wind wouldn't whisk away our papers as we studied. In the gazebo by the pond, the table and refreshments I had ordered were already prearranged, and thanks to the landscapers' efforts, the

flowerbeds were in full bloom. Elizabeth stopped occasionally to appreciate them, sliding her hand beneath their heavy heads so that she could breathe in their aromas.

Ah, what an angel!

At the gazebo, we sat down and opened our notebooks, but Elizabeth's gaze wasn't on her notes. Rather, she was fixated on the cake stand laden with sweets. I smiled and had a maid prepare tea for us. Elizabeth had an incorrigible sweet tooth, which was the one thing that made her seem her age. As such, I made it a point to always have cakes, cookies, or macarons prepared for her visits.

"Isn't it a little early for tea?" she asked, blushing with embarrassment, but she didn't try to stop me.

Studying was always just an excuse, after all—and somehow, gathering to study but getting no work done felt only natural as a student. We chatted about school as we snacked.

When the conversation dipped into a natural lull, I asked what was really on my mind. "By the way, Edward hasn't approached you lately, has he?"

"Lord Edward? You mean Count Norden's son? I'm afraid he hasn't. Why do you ask?"

He hasn't? I'd thought for sure he would've reported her friends' "misdeeds" to her. Perhaps he has more tact than I gave him credit for.

"In fact, I don't think I've ever met him in person," Elizabeth added after a moment's thought.

"Ah. Well, he happened to see the picture of you I keep in my pocket watch." I glanced up to see if her expression changed. "He mentioned wanting to meet you."

Elizabeth seemed utterly unfazed, just as I expected. "Oh, I see! Perhaps I should have a word with him, then."

"Don't bother; it's fine."

Elizabeth started in surprise, her macaron slipping between her fingers and

hitting her plate.

Drat...was that a tad too direct? She's cute when she's startled, though...

I cleared my throat, saying the first thing that came to mind to explain myself. "H-He's a bit of an odd one, to be frank. I've no idea what he might do if you approached him out of the blue."

"Is he? I'm sorry; I'll be careful, then. I wouldn't want to worry you."

Of course! I knew you'd say that!

Her airheadedness was her greatest defense and, to me, her deadliest weapon.

I shook my head. "No, I should apologize for being overprotective. I'm simply worried about what might happen if he realized how extraordinarily beautiful you are."

"Oh, my! I'm flattered that you think so highly of me. I think you're one of the loveliest people I've ever met."

She gave me a smile so pure and sweet that I was certain I'd get cavities.

Mgh... I'm glad she likes me so much, but now I feel even worse for hiding the truth.

I hurriedly changed the subject again, knowing full well I'd fare no better on my next topic. "S-So, three months at the Academy already... Time flies, doesn't it?"

"It does!"

"At the end of the year, we'll be adults, and after graduation we'll be wed."

She nodded, unfazed. "My, we don't have much time left, do we? I'd best start preparing myself."

I suppose we have been engaged for eight years now... It's hardly news. I'm grateful that she wants to be ready for it, but I wish she'd pay less attention to the formal trappings and a little more to me.

"About that." I cleared my throat awkwardly. "Perhaps it's time we take the next step in our relationship?"

“The next step?” she echoed endearingly, her amethyst eyes pouring into mine.

My expression hardened and I solemnly nodded. I’d been mentally preparing for this moment all last night. The time had come.

I met her gaze with every ounce of elegance and nobility I could muster. “May I call you Liza? Only when we’re alone, of course.”

I’d chosen a table for this exact purpose—not so large that she couldn’t see my face well, and not so small that it would feel overly intimate. Every minute detail was precisely coordinated for this moment.

“Of course!” she beamed, oblivious to my emotional eruption. “Do you mind if I call you Prince Vince, then?”

The sheer innocent bliss of her smile made me flush. Both the symbolic relevance of our becoming closer and the impact of having special nicknames for each other seemed hopelessly lost on her. Nonetheless, her smile was like a summer squall on the desert of my heart, and I felt alive once more.

I hurriedly stood up to put some distance between us. “O-Of course... Liza.”

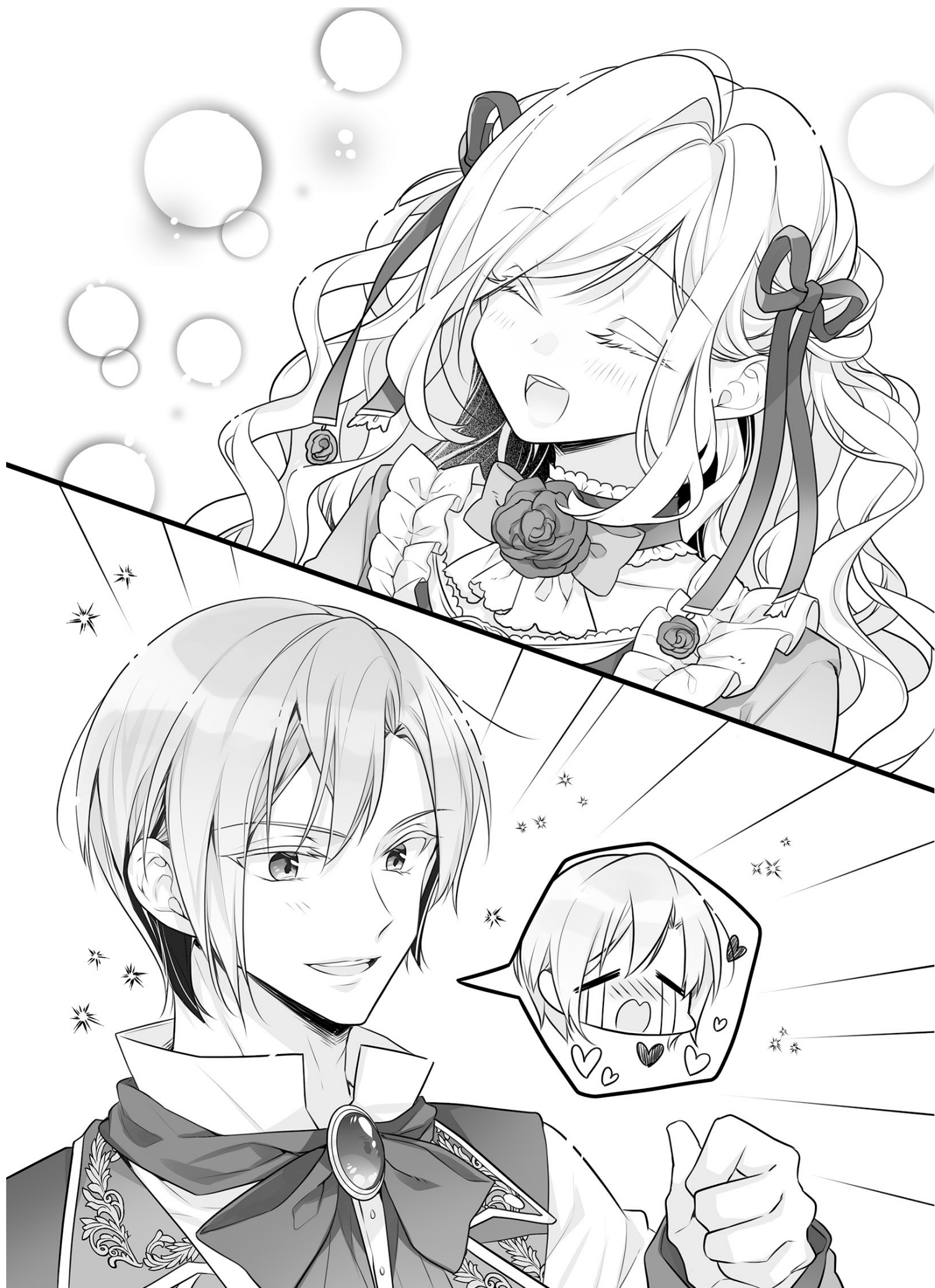
Elizabeth—no, Liza—looked up at me with a bashful smile.

“Thank you, Prince Vince.”

Ah, I can’t take it! I’m going to marry her! Er, wait, I really am.

Harold’s piteous gaze pierced my back, but nothing he could do would dampen my mood. I was the happiest man in the world.

I’ll do whatever it takes to neutralize those who would oppose our love... Whatever it takes.



Chapter 2: Yulisse's Secret

MY weekend with Elizabeth opened holes in my soft heart, but I nonetheless made progress on the case. It was official: Edward Norden was acting strangely. Since he had yet to confront Elizabeth or her entourage directly, he likely had some vestige of common sense remaining, but he visibly lost control in Lady Yulisse's presence. Particularly when she was reporting her supposed bullying to me, he was far too persistent.

Not only that, but his treatment of Lady Yulisse, particularly the ways he touched and gawked at her, was highly improper. No self-respecting knight would act so crassly, and thus I decided to investigate.

So the day after my meeting with Elizabeth, I summoned the most fitting man for the task.

"Hey~! I never thought you'd call me. Today must be my lucky day!" He stepped forward to give me a big hug.

Harold caught him just in time and glowered at him. "Watch yourself, Lord Raphael. If you wish to avoid the chopping block, you'll show His Royal Highness proper respect."

"Oops!" He shrugged and smirked. "I was just too excited to help myself."



We had known each other for years, but nobody was allowed to lay a finger on royalty without just cause—especially mages like Raphael. His father headed the Ministry of Magecraft, and he doubled as my magic tutor.

Despite being a year older than me, Raphael often accompanied his father to the palace, and we were made to compete in our studies. Our rivalry was overall short-lived, as he had far more opportunities for practice and easily surpassed me. He was frank with me to the point of rudeness on account of our shared history, despite his family being no less subordinate to the throne than the Nordens. Harold, naturally, saw his very existence as an insult and a threat.

Raphael winked at Harold, backing up halfway across the room with his hands raised. “Don’t worry, little guy, I won’t touch your master again.” Still smiling, he turned to face me. “So? Anything I can do for you?”

It was a tad difficult talking to him from such a distance, but as it was leagues better than tolerating his clinginess, I didn’t complain. Knowing him, he had already erected a barrier to prevent anyone from overhearing our conversation, even if we had to raise our voices. He was irritating, but his eye for detail was impeccable.

“Edward has been acting oddly,” I said.

He dramatically covered his mouth. “Oh, no! Has he finally stopped acting like a boiled-down code of chivalry on legs?!”

“I’m...not sure exactly what you mean by that, but I think so, yes.”

“Let me guess—you need someone to find out why?”

“Exactly. You know Lady Yulisse, don’t you? The girl who resembles the Star Maiden?”

His face brightened. “Lady Yulisse Merrifield? Why, of course I know her!”

Regrettably, his overwhelming magical prowess was matched with an overwhelming love of women. Rumor was that he’d been with countless women, but never made one cry, and the tales of his playboy antics were almost impressive. He had long purple hair that hung loosely past his shoulders and wore a monocle suited for magical analysis. He was genuinely amiable to

most people, to the point that he was almost too nice. People had a natural tendency to trust him, and if he already knew Lady Yulisse, that would make things even easier.

“Star Maiden is such an interesting little novel, isn’t it?” he continued jovially. “I’ve wanted to pay her a visit for some time now, but I always assumed you’d get all pouty if I did.”

I nodded. “You’d be right.”

Honestly, if not for the irritating way he talks, I’d love to make him one of my personal advisers when I’m king.

Raphael’s smile deepened. “If I have your permission, though, I’d *love* to figure out what dirty little secrets she’s hiding. Hehe, I’m going to enjoy this!”

“Just remember, you’re not to approach Elizabeth at any point or under any circumstances. Am I clear?” I stressed.

Even a brief meeting could be cataclysmic.

“Relax. I’d love to meet that fiancée of yours sooner or later, but I can save that little treat for your wedding. You’ll let me see her then, at least, won’t you?”

I froze. “O-Our wedding...”

Elizabeth’s smile came to mind, and my cheeks warmed. Her bashful smile after we picked pet names for each other was so potent that, even after thinking of it all night long, its sway over me was still immense.

Raphael sniggered bemusedly at my expression. Behind him, Harold sighed and rolled his eyes in a rare sign of disrespect. I swiftly composed myself and explained the details of Edward’s behavior to him.

After hearing everything, Raphael nodded. “My, that *is* interesting! Any idea what might be afoot?”

“I suspect there may be magic at work.”

His eyes lit up. “You don’t say?”

Magic was as valuable as it was rare. It was impossible to think that Lady

Yulisse, a mere baron's daughter, would have access to such a luxury on her own. The possibility alone warranted a thorough investigation—especially if your father happened to be the head of the Ministry of Magecraft.

“Hehe, I may have to report this to Father! Don't worry, I'll investigate Lady Yulisse myself. Look forward to the good news, now!” Raphael spun in place and gave me an almost comedic bow. I wasn't surprised—I'd piqued his interest by combining his love of women with his love of magic and conspiracies.

Honestly, what a magical man-whore.

“Come to think of it, the heroine of the novel makes all of the prince's friends fall for her,” he mused, smirking lewdly. “I wonder how our own little Star Maiden will try to seduce me? Oh, I can't wait!”

Forget letting him meet Elizabeth at our wedding—they should never come into contact with each other, ever.

He noticed me watching him, so he made a heart shape with his hands and winked at me. Any reply would just encourage him, so I ignored him.

“Oh, I nearly forgot. Harold?” I turned to my aide. “I've got a task for you, too.”

“Your word is my command.”

“First, read this.” I handed him my copy of *Star Maiden*, which he accepted with a polite bow. “After my latest read-through, I've come to the conclusion that the author must be a noble themselves.”

The novel's main claim to fame amongst the nobility was the characters' likenesses to Elizabeth and myself. It was the level of realism the author included that made it clear they were intimately familiar with noble life. From the appearance of the Academy to the Coming-of-Age Ball, there were enough similarities to the real places and events that no commoner could've written it on imagination alone. The author thus had to be a Royal Academy student, or else someone with similar privilege.

“Focus on those elements and see if you can track down the author. If a noble truly did write this...”

“That would be a grievous crime,” Harold finished. “Such slander may even warrant exile.”

Raphael nodded. “Makes sense. A noble might be able to get their paws on magic, too.”

I’d assumed that a commoner wrote it and added real people as characters so that it would sell, and that was innocent enough to go unpunished. However, if it was written by a noble, that was a different matter, especially since they were slandering the royal family. Worse, if they had written it not only to slander, but to make the story come to life and deal palpable damage to the throne and its interests...

That would be unforgivable.

Any enemy of the kingdom, no matter who they were, needed to be rooted out. They had already damaged Elizabeth’s and my reputation at school. I would stop them from interfering with our engagement if it was the last thing I did. A story required conflict, certainly—but life had no villain. Whoever was attempting to turn Elizabeth into some villainess needed to be found and neutralized with all due force. I would make an example of them. Then I would thwart any other wicked elements in the aristocracy standing against us.

I gave Harold a solemn look. “It’ll be difficult, but I’m counting on you.”

This may be the first time I’ve acted truly king-like.

Harold took a knee in deference. “As you will.”

After the formalities and solemn vows, the author was found the very next week—and in the most unexpected manner imaginable.



CLASSES had just ended for the day, and I was searching for an empty room to kill time in while I waited for a chance to talk with Elizabeth again. I had been using the classroom at the end of the second-floor hall of the central building, but Edward and Lady Yulisse sniffed me out, so I’d taken to using a different room every day. Harold was under orders to find me should anything pressing arise, but I hated the thought of dealing with those two fools myself. Mulling over their every word for ulterior motives had already gotten old.

As soon as I set foot in the third-year geography classroom, I realized I'd made a mistake. The room was already occupied. A single young lady was seated at a desk along the wall, such that she was invisible from the corridor. Her dense black bangs shielded her face and hid her expression. When she noticed me, she looked up wide-eyed.

"Hm? Aaaaaaugh?!"

She let out a puzzled scream and fell sideways out of her chair. The papers she was bending over flew across the room. Her seat clattered nearly loud enough to cover her strained grunt. The young lady looked up at me again, her face frozen in shock and terror.

What...? Under these circumstances, I should be the more surprised one.

I had never laid eyes on her before, but something was clearly afoot. I picked up one of the papers that had fallen by my feet and skimmed it. This time, it was my turn to shout.

"What's this?!"

"N-No! Please, don't read that!!"

She waved her arms in protest, but it was too late. Every last line was packed with text, and the names "Vincent" and "Elizabeth" were repeated time and time again.

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Perhaps you would care to explain yourself?"

"O-O-Oh, no...!" She trembled in terror, but she made no effort to flee. Her legs must have given out.

Upon examination, that paper was a page from a novel of sorts. In it, Vincent and Elizabeth were walking through town. Accompanied by the bare minimum of bodyguards, they shopped, ate from sweets booths on the roadside, and held hands as they strolled through the park. Then, when the wind picked up, Vincent graciously offered his coat to Elizabeth.

This...This is the date in town I've always envisioned for us!

I shot the lady another look. "Before you explain, I need the rest of this. Right now."

She was pale as she waited for her punishment with folded hands, but confusion had now crept onto her face. “U-Um... Okay...?”

An hour later, I’d gathered and ordered the scattered manuscript, and after reading through it, I arrived at two separate conclusions. The first was that the girl—Lady Selena Haven was her name—was writing about my and Elizabeth’s lovey-dovey life together as an engaged couple should be. Moreover, it was a work in progress, not even a quarter of the way finished. I didn’t know whether I should encourage her to finish it or have her executed for the unauthorized portrayal of a royal, but my second conclusion was far more pressing.

She was, without a doubt, *Star Maiden*’s author. I had only realized that since the novel was fresh in my mind, but the style of the manuscript in my hands was familiar to the most minute detail. Looking at Lady Selena now, she knew the gravity of this, and her countenance was that of a terrified criminal on death’s row. I wasn’t as chivalrous as Edward, but seeing her in such a state filled me with guilt.

I softened my expression and wore my usual princely smile. “I’d love to know what’s going on, if you don’t mind.”

“O-Of course! J-Just please, have mercy...!”

She stammered out her circumstances. House Haven was a mere viscount’s line, and they often struggled with finances. Lady Selena herself had been adding to the family coffers as a scribe since her youth. She had read several novels in that time and eventually became an author herself, using the income to support her family. When she enrolled in the Royal Academy, she was dazzled by the elegance and poise with which the higher nobles lived, and from that she conceived the novel—*Even the Stars Cry for the Star Maiden*.

“I-I’m so, soooooo sorry, Your Royal Highness... I only used you and your fiancée in my novel because you were both so amazing, like stars in the sky. As soon as I enrolled and saw you two acting so distantly, though, I *knew* it had to be my fault... I’m so, so sorry for everything!”

Based on the way she spoke, she was convinced I’d have her killed. Her eyes brimmed with tears, yet not even one fell. Countryside noble she may be, but she knew that crying was beneath her.

“All I’ve ever been good at is writing, s-so I thought I’d write a new novel, this time h-hoping you two will be happy together. Oh, and don’t worry, I’m not planning on selling it!”

“You do realize the contents of *Star Maiden* could constitute treason, don’t you?”

She held in a sigh. “Y-Yes... As soon as I saw the illustrations, I realized how bad it looked. I tried to stop the publisher, but they wouldn’t listen... They said I’d be fine, since there were so many other stories like it...”

From the sound of it, she wasn’t expecting it to be so popular, either. She knew that she had sinned, and she regretted every bit of it—the impact on my and Elizabeth’s relationship included.

“I understand now,” I finally said. “I need to ask you one more thing, however—Lady Yulisse had nothing to do with the novel, correct?”

“No, not a thing! I-I’m embarrassed to admit it, but I based the protagonist off myself...”

“Hmm... I can see that, yes.”

At second glance, she also had midnight blue hair and eyes, and despite being one rank below baron, the titles were indeed quite similar. No one would associate her with the protagonist because she was a third-year at the Academy, and even fewer would guess that she was the author. I knew now how her impoverished roots led her to pen the novel and that she had no intention of slander. She deeply regretted the entire affair.

“I’m not sure I can let you go so easily...” I said.

“I-I’m really, truly sorry for everything I’ve done, but I’m ready to accept whatever punishment you give me. I did interfere with your love for each other on a whim, after all...”

“Love...for each other?”

Lady Selena blinked the tears out of her eyes and looked at me in surprise. “*You don’t love each other?*” she seemed to be saying, in a gaze so sharp it pierced my soul.

I'm afraid my love is purely one-sided.

"You look at Lady la Montlivere a lot, don't you?"

Oh no... I haven't been staring at her that much, have I? Harold did mention I shoot a hundred glances a minute at her whenever we're together. Authors are far too perceptive of this sort of thing, aren't they?

Life wasn't a novel, however, and I knew Elizabeth would never return my affections so readily. Just as I was starting to droop in dejection, Lady Selena cut in again.

"Lady la Montlivere spends a lot of time looking at you too, you know. I'm sure she feels strongly about you."

"...Really?"

"Really. Although, to be fair, if we say you glance at her a hundred times a minute, she looks at you only about fifteen times. Still, I can tell she likes you from the way she does it!"

That's it, Lady Selena is innocent. End of story.

Fifteen compared to my hundred wasn't a bad score. It was enough to give me hope.

I beamed at her, and Lady Selena flushed and became flustered.

"Thank you for your invaluable insight," I said. "Don't worry, I won't breathe a word about your writing endeavors, past or present."

"R-Really?! I'm, um...I'm so happy to hear that!"

Drat. My princely smile at full blast was a tad strong. She looks ready to faint, poor thing. I wish it worked even a tenth as well on Elizabeth...

Either way, I had a new ally, and one that could formally testify against Lady Yulisse should it come to that. Besides, even if I punished her now, it wouldn't undo the damage already done. No, she had an important task to fulfill.

"I do have one condition for my secrecy, however."

"What is it? I'll do anything!"

I pointed at the manuscript cradled in her arms. "I need you to finish that."

She looked baffled, but explaining myself would only further damage my pride.

“You’re the only one who can do it,” I pressed. “Will you?”

“Of course. Leave it to me!” She clenched her fists in determination.

I nodded firmly at her. *Yes!*

While I mopped up the *Star Maiden* mess, Lady Selena would chronicle Elizabeth and my love story as it should be. There was no point in troubling her with trifles like my pride when so much was at stake.



AFTER thanking Lady Selena again for her cooperation, I left the geography classroom. Elizabeth’s study session should have been finished, and it was finally time for the best part of my day. My feet were light as air as I skipped down the hall towards my beloved’s classroom. She and her friends used a room on the first floor of the west building, and I had Harold take my carriage outside the nearby park for that occasion. I needed an alibi, after all, a convenient reason for me to be passing by her classroom at that precise moment. If not for the *Star Maiden* nonsense, I would be giving her rides home and taking her out on dates, like in Lady Selena’s sequel.

Just as I arrived outside the study group’s room, the ladies inside bid farewell to each other. My timing was so perfect that Harold might accuse me of being a stalker again, but I couldn’t risk taking multiple passes down the same corridor. I had to have precise timing to avoid suspicion.

The door opened to reveal a handful of noblewomen.

“Oh?”

“Oh, my!”

“Well...!”

The ladies quickly remembered their manners after their initial surprise, picked their jaws off the floor, and dipped low in curtsies.

“Good evening, Your Royal Highness.”

“We haven’t had the pleasure of seeing you in some time.”

“Y-Yes, what a total coincidence,” I stammered, raising my hand in greeting. “I’m glad you all seem to be doing well.”

Elizabeth wasn’t among them. She was likely still gathering her belongings inside. I couldn’t brazenly peek behind the ladies into the room, so I had no choice but to stand awkwardly in the doorway.

“Lady Elizabeth?” one of them said, turning around. “His Royal Highness is here to see you.”

I-I’m not here to see her! Not at all! At least officially. Oh, I want to see her so bad. Thank you for calling her.

“He is?” came Elizabeth’s singsong voice from within, ringing out like the tinkling of a silver bell.

Someone moved inside, and a moment later, Elizabeth appeared in the doorway. Her hair was neatly pulled back in a single bundle so as not to interfere with her studying. She looked even more mature than she usually did, not to mention more elegant. I was so smitten that I nearly forgot that we had an audience.

Her soft lips formed a smile. “Prince Vin—”

“Prince Vincent!!”

What reached my ears was not the beautiful chiming of Elizabeth’s voice but an unrefined ruckus from behind me. I turned to find Lady Yulisse, of all people, scampering towards me in a manner unbefitting a noble.

Drat.

“Please help me, Prince Vincent! A strange man is after me!”

“Lady Yulisse? What are you doing here?”

I had no right to ask her such a question, but there was no reason for anyone aside from Elizabeth’s study group to be there. Lady Yulisse was prompt in answering by clamping her arms around my elbow and looking up at me with dew-filled eyes.

The noblewomen watching us opened their eyes in shock. I cast a quick glance at Elizabeth to find her covering her mouth with her hand, sheer surprise in her eyes. Touching anyone of the opposite sex in public was highly immoral—*especially* when standing right in front of one's fiancée.

What a tramp... She's doing this on purpose, isn't she?!

I nearly lost my temper with her then and there, but I clenched my fists and rode it out at the last moment. Casting her aside now like some peasant would be an affront to my own dignity.

You're acting, aren't you? How dare you lie in wait to pounce on me like this! Have you no shame?!

"Prince Vincent!"

At the sound of that familiar voice, Lady Yulisse released me. Harold was standing there, anger written with unusual boldness on his face. He had evidently pried her free of me. Not even I could tell if he was showing his emotions where I couldn't as a good servant would, or if this was an unprecedented act of rudeness on his part.

His look only hardened as he swiftly released her, glaring. "Lady Yulisse. No proper noble should ever lay hands on another, nor should she call another's name so lightly. *Especially* if that someone is royalty."

"O-Oh... I'm sorry, Lord Harold," she blubbered in a nasally tone that reeked of falsehood. Her gaze dropped, and she fiddled with her hands. "I was just so scared..."

All eyes on her were full of reprimand—except for Elizabeth's.

"You said there was a strange man after you?" Elizabeth asked curiously.

Lady Yulisse nodded. "Y-Yes... He approached me out of nowhere, and—"

"I just had a word with him," Harold cut in sternly. "He's a student. He poses no threat whatsoever."

Elizabeth beamed. "Why, that's wonderful news!"

All of us could tell that she intended to end our conversation then and there. Behind her, several of her friends were visibly shaken by Harold's shouting. A

few were the ladies who had confronted Lady Yulisse the other day, and they glared daggers at her. Nonetheless, Elizabeth wanted to prevent the situation from escalating further.

Oh, what a saint!

Lady Yulisse smiled, casting a sideways glance at me as though for my sake alone. “Y-Yes... Um, thank you. I was wrong. In that case, I think I’ll go home now. Good evening, everyone.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Good evening to you too, Lady Yulisse.”

Lady Yulisse curtsied, forgoing pushing her luck any further. With one more encouraging smile from Elizabeth, she scurried off down the corridor. She seemed strangely confident for someone who had been trembling in her high heels moments before, and she had no issue walking off alone. The ladies plunged into gossip about her misdemeanors.

Elizabeth cut off their accusations. “There’s no need to use language like that, now. Lady Yulisse isn’t experienced with our etiquette, and she doesn’t know many people, either. I know I’d feel surprised if someone I barely knew tried to talk to me.”

The gossiping stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Her tone was soft and compassionate, but it had an air of finality to it. She had the most right of any of them to be upset, so if she said there was no need to gossip, that was that. She maintained a marvelous balance. My silence and Harold’s unusual rage put the group on edge, but by taking Lady Yulisse’s side, she prevented the contempt towards her from growing.

“Let’s head home,” Elizabeth suggested. “I’m sure your families are wondering what’s taken you so long.”

The ladies slowly dispersed. Some finished gathering their things in the room while the others left and chatted as if nothing amiss had happened.

I hope Elizabeth is all right...

When I cast a glance at her, she had already been looking at me. Our eyes met, and my heart skipped a beat, but she was the first to break eye contact. She curtsied lightly before walking by me.

As she passed, she whispered in my ear with her dulcet voice, “Please don’t fret over me, Prince Vince.”

My heart nearly stopped.

H-Honestly, does she want me to fall for her?! Er, wait, I already have.



AFTER Elizabeth and her friends left the west building, I boarded my carriage. The second I closed the door and was away from prying eyes, my poker face collapsed.

She called me Prince Vince—no, she whispered it in my ear!

It had taken every bit of composure I had to keep myself from collapsing into a gibbering mess on the spot. Her bashful smile the other day was stunning, but the way she mixed discretion with playfulness and showed the extent of her trust in me was every bit as brilliant. Of course, there was a chance she was attempting to cheer me up after Lady Yulisse shocked me. I couldn’t get ahead of myself. Regardless, the crisis was averted, and Elizabeth reaffirmed herself as the most wonderful person I’d ever met.

Our last interaction replayed in my head on a loop, but Harold was silent. His usual scowl was missing. Actually, he looked exhausted.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

Guilt overtook his features, and he averted his gaze to the window. After a moment, he sheepishly looked back at me, his eyes full of concern.

“My apologies,” he said.

“Enough of that. What happened?”

Something was wrong. Anxiety built up within me. He opened his mouth to speak but stopped; we were already too close to the palace. After we disembarked, we moved to my room, where we could talk in peace. I sat on the sofa, but Harold stood, uneasy.

Finally, he spoke, “I have two things I must report to you.”

“Go on.”

“The first is the identity of the student who approached Lady Yulisse—Marquis Enhandt’s eldest son.”

“Lucas...?!”

So he was the person “chasing her.”

Lucas Enhandt was a third-year, two years our senior. His father was a chancellor and one of my father’s most trusted confidants. He was naturally expected to achieve great things.

“It seems he has taken a liking to Lady Yulisse,” Harold continued. “He happened to spot her and attempted to talk with her, but she cut him off and ran away, claiming she had business to attend to.”

“Because she spotted me, correct?”

“Most likely. Lord Lucas abandoned his intentions of pursuing her as soon as I questioned him.”

I let out a gargantuan sigh. I almost had to admire Lady Yulisse for throwing a stranger under the coach so readily. She no doubt knew nothing of noble manners whatsoever, raised in the countryside with nothing but flowers and butterflies to occupy her poor little mind. Granted, it was possible she would be genuinely upset if an unknown man approached her so suddenly—and yet I couldn’t shake the suspicion that she was more composed than she let on, and that her crying was an act.

Or perhaps she’s caught both Lucas and Edward’s attention on purpose? No, I can’t imagine Lucas getting so absorbed in a book.

I tabled that question for the moment.

“So? What’s the second thing you have to report?”

Harold adamantly faced the ground, as if to shield his expression from me, but I could see enough from where I was sitting. It was like looking into the eyes of the devil—they had a hard glint, and his lips were pressed into a stern line. A chill went up my spine.

“My second report is far worse.” He didn’t move a muscle.

“Go on.”

You're starting to scare me, Harold.

"I believe that Lady Yulisse has received a Blessing of some kind. When I laid hands on her to distance her from you, I felt a swell of something not unlike love."

"You what?" I bolted to my feet in shock. "You know what love feels like?"

"Yes. I happen to be interested in someone."

"You are?! Who?! Don't tell me it's Elizabeth!"

"Of course not." He wrinkled his nose at me in mild irritation. "Lady la Montlivere is a wonderful individual, but I would never be so callous as to fall for my master's fiancée."

I let out a faint sigh of relief that he seemed back to normal.

I never would've guessed he's in love, though. I'd thought he had no interest in romance, what with how coldly he treats me regarding Elizabeth.

As badly as I wanted to squeeze every detail out of him, the look in his eyes told me he would humor me no further.

Well, this is no fun. Would it kill him to just tell me? I'll have to find out some other way...

"Fine, I won't ask," I said. "But a Blessing? Are you sure?"

His brow furrowed. "Positive. What I felt when I touched her was not of my own heart."

Ah, and he thought it improper to admit he felt something for the enemy, even if for a moment. That makes sense. I understand you, friend. Should I forget my love for Elizabeth, even for a moment, I'd tear apart my pillow at night from lack of sleep.

"That would explain why she clung to my arm, then," I concluded. "But I didn't feel a thing... My affections for Elizabeth must have protected me."

"I would think the Ward on you that deflects Blessings is a more likely answer."

I knew that, but he could have humored me. All royals had a Ward of the

highest caliber on them. His grim, devilish-look was back, so I decided not to call him out for his rudeness.

“But a Blessing... I’d suspected magic was at play since we saw Edward acting so strangely, but this is quite serious,” I said grimly.

If magic was in the picture, then Lady Yulisse and her family weren’t operating alone. Mages were exceptionally rare. Most of them were nobles in the direct service of the royal family, such as Raphael’s family, while the others were employed in workshops run by the upper nobility.

In other words, there shouldn’t be any mages not allied with and supervised by the royal family. A Blessing that could influence one’s emotions so greatly was a particularly powerful magic—in effect, a Curse—and only an elite mage could know the first thing about it. It was impossible for Baron Merrifield to access magic of that caliber.

That meant that someone intended for Lady Yulisse to play the novel’s heroine. Their objectives were clear—they wanted my engagement to be rendered null and for either House la Montlivere or myself to fall out of power.

Nothing could make me betray Elizabeth, and she herself was far too decent to fall for such a ploy. The Knight Commander and chancellor’s sons had already fallen under Lady Yulisse’s spell, however, and the Minister of Magecraft’s son had just gotten himself involved. Even my half-brother had been hit by their spellcraft. The story was already in motion, and a collection of future higher nobles were gathering about her in ways they normally wouldn’t. Not only that, but every gossip-loving noble in the Academy had their eyes on us. Our opponents had a decisive advantage. Paired with Lady Yulisse’s claims of her possessions being destroyed...

“Increase the guard on Elizabeth, now.”

Not simple spies—she needed trained bodyguards.

“As you will.”

Harold, having arrived at the same conclusion, dipped his head low in agreement.



HAROLD swiftly and mercilessly shut down my offer to protect Elizabeth personally, so I had to sit and wait for the next few weeks. Raphael and I met in an empty classroom, and after he raised a barrier to prevent us from being overheard, I told him our findings.

“Oh, Yulie has a Blessing, all right,” he replied offhandedly. “I’d say about three layers of Charm. She has one of the largest pieces of manacite I’ve ever seen in her room. She thinks it’s just a lucky charm, but that’s the source of the Blessing.”

My jaw nearly dropped. Behind Raphael, Harold was as expressionless as always, but I gathered he was disgusted with the implications of Raphael’s findings.

Just how does Raphael do it?

I cut straight to the point. “Y-You’ve been in Lady Yulisse’s room, then?”

He shrugged. “She invited me to her estate for a little fun over the weekend. To be clear, she invited me into her room out of the kindness of her heart. I didn’t let my ulterior motives pressure her in the least.”

“So you had ulterior motives?”

“Of course. It’d be rude to visit a young lady without any.”

“What is that you called her, by the way? The sound of it makes my skin crawl.”

“Oh, come now. Yulie is an adorable name for a little kitten, don’t you think?”

I suppose that’s run-of-the-mill for him...

I hadn’t expected him to take his investigation all the way to her home. His gleeful smile seemed pleased, however, and I couldn’t deny that his methods were producing results. Harold would never be able to gather information the same way.

I massaged my temples to dispel my growing headache as I put our discussion back on track. “This manacite ore you saw... You’re certain it had Charm?”

There were Blessings of all types, but those that held sway over the human heart were the worst. Among them, Charm was the vilest.

He grinned, amusement filling his eyes. “Oh, yes. A perfectly round Crystal big enough to fit comfortably in one hand, full to bursting with sweet, sweet Charm!”

“That big? I’d imagine people would remember a gem like that.”

Harold nodded. “We should be able to track down the seller without much difficulty.”

Raphael sighed. “Why must you boys be so dull? The bigger question is, who drew the magic circle on it and incanted it? Oh, just thinking of it makes me tingle!”

“All right, I’ll have men look into that, too.”

My muted reaction disappointed him, but he didn’t press me further. I had requested the investigation in the first place, and he wasn’t about to overstep his bounds. Instead, he pursed his lips and kicked idly at the floor, twirling his purple hair in one hand.

I bet Lady Yulisse doesn’t suspect him of a thing... Not that I would in her shoes. Honestly, his innocent act is so potent it’s terrifying.

“Anyhow, Yulie’s Charm makes it so that anyone who gets close to her becomes obsessed. Worse, it works especially well on anyone who’s already curious about her ties to that novel. I never thought a mere story could work so well with a Blessing!”

“Does it get stronger if someone touches her, by any chance?” I ventured.

“Of course! The closer someone gets to her, and the more they touch her—and of course, *where* they touch her also matters—the stronger the Charm becomes.” He gave me a knowing wink and a thumbs-up. “I’ll bet Yulie knows that much, at least.”

Oh. He...experimented at her house? I really didn’t need to know that.

Harold didn’t react openly, but waves of disgust billowed off him from across the room. Charm was fully deserving of its foul reputation.

“Does it work on women, too?” I asked.

Elizabeth had a Ward on her as well, since she was my fiancée, but her friends

were defenseless. The last thing I wanted was for Elizabeth's closest friends to turn against her.

Raphael looked away. For the first time, he hesitated, as if he knew what I was getting at.

"Well...if they're a fan of *Star Maiden*, I'm sure it would affect them somehow." He hesitated. "Of course, your dear fiancée's friends don't seem to be fans of Yulie, and I don't imagine they've gotten close enough to be affected."

"You're saying they need to like her for the Charm to take effect?"

"Or rather, it'll only work a little, and that would only make them hate Yulie more."

"That would explain it, then."

They'd be stuck obsessing over someone they hated, after all.

I looked at Harold, who looked at me as though it had nothing to do with him whatsoever. He'd apparently overcome his trauma, but I did have to replace a pillow he'd beaten into oblivion.

"At any rate, excellent work," I told him. "I'd like to have Marquis Dominic look into the seller and the incanter, so pass that on to him."

This has gotten rather tricky, though.

Marquis Dominic Marshall was Raphael's father, and he was both my magic tutor and the most powerful mage in the palace. If any pieces of manacite that large had exchanged hands, he was bound to know about them.

I suppose I'll have to tell Father about this, though I'd rather leave him and Mother out of this if possible.

As I grimaced at the thought of seeing my parents, Raphael cut in again. "I'm not done with my report, you know."

"You're not?"

"I wasn't the only one who visited Yulie. Edward was there, too."

"He *what*?"

“In fact, she told me she’d call Lucas as well next time. She seemed to be enjoying herself, too. I imagine she enjoys having men fight over her.”

“She *what*?!”

“You wouldn’t believe the look Edward gave me when I walked in. Why, you’d think I’d killed his whole family! I was plenty shocked myself, to be honest.” He chuckled, but Harold and I were too stunned to say a word. “But who am I to deny fate? It’s precisely what that novel says we’re to do.”

C-Come to think of it, I remember a scene like that in Star Maiden... No, I don’t want to dwell on that a second longer. My poor brain couldn’t take it.



THE story was on track. Harold and I checked the novel, and we were squarely in chapter five of ten. At this point, Lady Yulisse should be subject to all sorts of abuse from her higher noble classmates for her low birth, but she would overcome them with her cheerful disposition and her new friends.

Of said new friends, the crown prince’s closest friends and future aides were especially supportive. She invites them to her house to thank them, and while the young lords clash over her, she sees them as nothing more than friends and fails to even notice. Through them, she meets the crown prince and knows true love for the first time.

“Eugh.”

I pitied the poor aides for getting led on by the heroine as I closed the book. A knock came at my door, and Harold got up to check who it was. He returned a moment later.

“Dinner is prepared. Both His and Her Majesty await.”

“...I’ll be right there.”

I didn’t have much choice. They were both constantly occupied with their royal duties, always at some ball or event until late. It was an incredible coincidence that they were both available on the very day I had business to discuss with them. I was not, however, looking forward to it.

“Mother will be there, too...” I shuddered.

Together, the two were a force of nature. Even the house steward silently feared dealing with them together, and their schedules almost always had them separated by “sheer coincidence.” Tonight was the rare exception. I should be grateful for the chance to discuss the recent issues with them—and business aside, I should be glad to see my parents—but I would’ve much preferred several days’ advance notice to mentally prepare myself.

I changed into proper evening attire and headed for the dining hall, where the cutlery had already been laid out and nearly every servant was in attendance. Mother and Father had just arrived themselves, and butlers were seeing them to their seats. Father sat at the head of the table, with Mother in the next seat and myself across from her. They wore similar silk garments with nearly identical arabesque embroidery.

Really? Matching clothes?

“Father, Mother. I am overjoyed to see you,” I greeted them politely as I bowed and took my seat.

Age had only made Father more handsome, and he gave me a magnanimous grin as I sat down. Mother’s posture was likewise perfect, and she watched me with the utmost composure.

“We are most pleased to see you, Vincent,” Father drawled.

Mother nodded. “I’ve seen so little of you as of late. It almost makes me wonder if the servants have some sort of grudge.”

Their tones and expressions were soft, but there was the unwavering resolve of royalty embedded in their smiles.

I gave them my best princely smile. “You have been rather busy as of late, Mother.”

Mother had been a regular participant in House leuta’s salons since last spring. Duchess leuta was a woman of excellent humor and a gentle disposition, and one of Mother’s closest friends. Whenever the two were together, the world at large was a good deal nicer in comparison, and I was reminded that some people had more in common with great monsters than human beings. If memory served, the leuta salon was supposed to be held that night.

“Shouldn’t you be at the leuta—”

I cut myself off hurriedly. The air grew a touch colder, and while Mother kept smiling at me, her eyes were sharp and narrow as knives. I didn’t need to be told that my question was a mistake.

In an effort to lighten the mood, Father raised a hand. “We heard Duchess leuta has been inviting more guests as of late. Your mother has decided not to attend and alleviate the duchess of further hardships.”

“Precisely,” Mother echoed, not looking away from me once.

Ah, I see. That was the worst thing I could’ve asked, then.

There were only three houses in the country with the title of Duke—Elizabeth’s la Montliveres, the leutas, and the Drewleids. If the new guests to the salon were the la Montliveres, Mother would have welcomed them with open arms, and Father wouldn’t have withheld their names. No, Duke Drewleid’s family must have heard of the salon and announced their participation. Despite Mother’s hatred of them, neither she nor the leutas could reject them outright.

House Drewleid was a new bloodline, started in my great-grandfather’s time by my great-great-uncle. Despite their freshness, they were higher nobles. Regrettably, my great-great-uncle’s generous personality was not in their blood. I had only met Duke Drewleid a few times, but he acted as though he were the rightful king and treated me like a bastard child. His son was just as insufferable. He would torment me in the subtlest ways, like filling my bags with rocks or offering to share his meal with me, then giving me nothing but detestable green peppers. I had overcome my hatred of peppers, but I didn’t miss him a bit in the years we hadn’t met. If I remember correctly, he was a third-year at the Academy.

I’d rather not run into him again... I’ll have to avoid the third-year classrooms from now on.

I let out a dejected sigh. Mother’s smile broadened into a warm grin. Anyone who didn’t know her might call her smile dazzling.

“Enough about that, now. Why don’t we discuss something more pleasant?”

Father smiled in suit. "We concur."

The servants brought out appetizers, elegant enough to suit the most opulent of dinner parties. I could tell from their smiles that the new topic would be less than agreeable to me.

"How is it going with Lady Elizabeth?" they asked in near-perfect unison.

My gaze dropped to my plate. They both let out disappointed sighs, the smiles vanishing from their lips. I, too, lost any sense of princeliness about me.

That's a rather delicate subject for me right now, Mother.

To them, I was a pawn for succession, a tool for the kingdom, but they fawned over Elizabeth as though she were their true daughter. That was my fault. I had spurned and rebelled against every tutor they assigned to me before meeting her, after which I was perfectly behaved. I was a dunce at the time, so Mother would personally edit and revise any poetry I attempted to send her. Whenever a reply arrived, Father would burst with pride. Every time it happened, they gushed over Elizabeth's endless virtues.

It was one of the last parts of my past I wanted to revisit.

I could hardly admit it openly, but listening to them proselytize Elizabeth to no end made me worship her as well. Despite the whole mess being my fault, I loathed them more than any pubescent teenager rightfully should; I barely felt related to them. By the time I realized how I felt, they had gotten lost in their work, and whenever one or the other was home, I would hide in my room under the pretext of studying. Any day I didn't have to see them was a good day.

"We had thought attending the Academy with her would help." Father sighed.

"Don't you talk with her between classes?" Mother pressed. "You're her fiancé, aren't you? How come you haven't been sitting with her at lunch, or at least seeing her home?"

If only I could, Mother. If only.

House Drewleid was fortunately gone from Mother's mind, but she was now tearing my already-battered heart to shreds. I stared at my appetizer, dejected,

as a servant falteringly served me a dinner roll and soup. Both my parents took up their spoons, not sparing so much as a thought to their ivory silk attire. Even as they ate, however, their assault continued.

“Well, even if you haven’t been talking to her at school, you’d best be sending her letters. Have you considered flowers? Perfume?”

Father shook his head. “No, you must not abuse the luxuries of the throne, else you risk alienating her. We suggest you take her out on the town in disguise. We have heard a circus is visiting. We would gladly take Our wife there, if only Our duties did not forbid it.”

“Oh, Dear! What a wonderful idea!” Mother cooed. “You *must* buy Lady Elizabeth a gift, of course. Tell her to treat it as well as she would you, if only you could be together.”

“...”

Ever since reading Lady Selena’s novel, I wanted nothing more than to do just that, but I couldn’t risk it. My parents continued planning my would-be date with glee, spilling not a drop of soup on their clothes as they prattled on.

I let out an inward sigh as I watched them. Clearly, they hadn’t heard a word of the whole *Star Maiden* debacle. That was a good thing—if Mother knew what Elizabeth was going through, she’d likely march on the Academy herself. I never knew what she would do next or what was going through her head, and I remember the steward grimacing as he explained how he packed her schedule precisely so she wouldn’t cause unnecessary trouble.

They seemed to enjoy discussing the best date spots for Elizabeth, but every word carried great weight and passion behind it. “A king should have the foresight and composure to make the cruelest of decisions in the most peaceful of circumstances,” or so it’s said, and I felt the import of those words as I watched them.

“As you will, Father,” I said. “I will plan to take Elizabeth to the circus. As soon as I have a date and itinerary in mind, I will ask you for permission.”

“Very well.”

Even if my unease had slipped out in my tone, he paid no notice. Heart still

racing, I focused on my meal in silence.



“IT seems you still have much to do before you can enjoy Lady Elizabeth’s company. Are We correct?”

As soon as dinner ended, Father took me into a drawing room alone. I had feared he knew the date was doomed as soon as he sent the servants away, but I was nonetheless glad we weren’t discussing it over dinner.

“Have you heard, then?”

“We have eyes and ears in many places. That novel is troubling you, is it? We found it quite interesting Ourselves.”

His tone was light and playful. I’d never once seen him lose his calm. I nodded and explained everything that had happened, including Raphael’s most recent findings. As soon as I mentioned the Charm Blessing, the mood became palpably graver.

“...So now I plan on asking Marquis Dominic about the manacite’s roots,” I concluded.

“Understood. We imagine Raphael has already explained the situation, so We will ask Dominic Ourselves.”

“Can you let me handle this case?”

“Hmm... We imagine Dominic can handle the Blessing, and We will punish the wrongdoers personally. The rest, We leave to you.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” I bowed deeply.

In other words, I had carte blanche in the Academy. There was a royal task force that worked specifically on conspiracies, but not even they could infiltrate a school unnoticed. They wouldn’t pass as students, and their movements would be too limited as faculty. Actual students were better suited for the operation. There was another layer to Father’s permission, however—this was a challenge to my birthright. If I couldn’t handle this issue, I would be unworthy of my title as crown prince.

“Besides, Lady Elizabeth is central to this conundrum. We would not dare

leave the issue to another.”

“Y-Yes... I suppose you’re right.”

“We have one more condition that you must follow at all costs.”

He gave me a serious look, and I could tell that whatever it was would be crucial to keeping the peace. I met his sapphire gaze.

“You must not inform your mother of this.”

“Understood.”

That explained his insistence on secrecy, then. He didn’t need to breathe another word as to why. I nodded knowingly, and he returned a nod of kingly approval.

Chapter 3: Follow That Manacite!

“**HERE** are my findings.”

The next weekend, my magic tutor, Marquis Dominic Marshall, arrived outside my room to deliver his report, and I was nearly struck speechless. I knew what he looked like, but the gap between him and his son Raphael was astonishing. It was hard to believe they were related.

The report looked like a tiny notebook in his thick, brawny arms. While he wore a robe just like Raphael did, his shapely muscles bulged against the fabric at every opportunity, and his chiseled jaw was accented by thick, bushy eyebrows and an immaculate goatee. He looked more soldier than mage.

What do dinners at the Marshall mansion look like? I wondered.

Nevertheless, I accepted the report from him. “Thank you.”

The papers were financial records. Crystals like the one Raphael described were only unearthed once a year at best, and as such, they always sent ripples through the local markets. It was easy to track every hand it passed through, from the refiners to the retailers to the eventual purchasers.

According to the records, it was bought from the mine by a major manacite processor, where it was carved and polished, then bought directly by a noble. The name listed was—

“Count Zachary Norden?”

Edward’s own father.

Lord Dominic nodded grimly. “Precisely.”

There was no record of the manacite changing hands after that, and no mention of it being engraved or incanted either. Reporting they put a taboo Blessing on it would’ve been idiotic, after all.

“I’m searching for the mage who incanted it,” Dominic rumbled. “Raphael no doubt told you only a handful of mages could have done it. Even on the black

market, I should be able to find the culprit.”

“Excellent, please do. But why Lord Zachary, of all people...?” I massaged my temple and sighed.

He was the current Knight Commander and one of the more martial families, so it was hard to believe he would spend so much on a manacite in the first place. It reeked of a plot—why would he go so far as to put a top-class Curse on it, especially when his own son was its very first victim? Letting his son fall under its spell to allay suspicion was a classic trick, but the whole affair stunk of carelessness.

As I pondered over it, Lord Dominic sighed deeply. “We often chat, since we’re both fathers of Academy boys. He was just complaining about his son fancying a lower noble girl. I can’t believe it was an act.”

“I agree,” I said. “It seems Lord Zachary is a victim as well.”

Especially considering his title and influence, he had little to gain by interfering in my affairs. If anything, Edward bumbling around like a fool would make him lose face—but it didn’t stop there.

“The Count was present when I first met Elizabeth, and he’s been my sword instructor since I was a child. In other words—”

“He knows that Your Royal Highness is a head-over-heels, absolute weak-kneed jellyfish for Lady Elizabeth,” Lord Dominic finished, his hand flying to his mouth like he regretted overstepping his bounds with that remark.

“Er... Exactly.”

Mother and Father were one thing, but I disliked how every member of the court had an intimate understanding of my love life. At least now that was to my advantage.

“He would never try to separate you from your dearly beloved,” Lord Dominic concluded. “Using Charm to bring his son together with a baron’s daughter would be pointless as well.”

“Don’t forget that he’s competing for her affections with a marquis’ son,” I added. “He can only suffer from that.”

“Something must be afoot.” He folded his arms across his barrel of a chest and stroked his goatee in thought. “If I may be so bold, Your Royal Highness, I have an idea.”



AFTER finishing my discussion with Lord Dominic, I summoned Harold, and we went out into the garden to read over *Star Maiden*. I was draped over a bench, surrounded by topiary shaped like animals in comical poses. The sun and the mild breeze were pleasant as I watched Mother’s pet peacock strut to and fro. It was the perfect place to relax. I couldn’t read *Star Maiden* in my room with a clear conscience, after all—the portrait of Elizabeth I hung there made me feel too guilty to focus.

Of course, Elizabeth is innocent in every way imaginable—I’m simply too weak to live with myself if I disrespected her like that.

Coincidentally, I was unable to read the weekly installments of love stories Lady Selena sent me in my room for the same reason. I didn’t want a larger-than-life image of her staring down at me as I blushed and whimpered over the text. Harold suggested I flip the portrait around, but I couldn’t force Elizabeth to stare at the wall like that. He was a monster for even suggesting it.

So I’d done much of my recent reading in the garden. If I ever needed to calm myself, I looked up at the bowing chameleons and the rabbits perched on their hind legs. The green tones of the shrubbery were easy on my eyes as well.

I realized soon after why the garden was a poor idea, however.

“Hello, Prince Vincent.”

At first, I thought the voice was a mere delusion, and I didn’t even reply. It wasn’t possible to hear Elizabeth’s voice in the middle of the palace. Even while reading *Star Maiden*, I couldn’t stop thinking about her—I could already hear Harold’s teasing words. Sorrow pricked my heart.

“Hello, Prince Vincent!” the voice repeated, a little more loudly.

“E-E-E-Elizabeth?!” I bolted to my feet.

The bench was beside a small square, connected by four walkways. Standing

at the one opposite my bench was Elizabeth herself, accompanied by Duke la Montlivere.

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, Your Royal Highness,” her father said.

“Likewise, Duke la Montlivere.” I met the duke’s gaze and bowed. “You as well, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth and her father curtsied and bowed, but her eyes were fixed on the book in my hands. I jammed it under my bench cushion, hoping she didn’t see the title.

“What brings you here?” I managed to ask Elizabeth without stuttering. “This is quite a surprise.”

It was like she’d caught me cheating. I wanted to justify myself, but my brain fumbled up the words. If I asked her about the recent turn of events at school, that would make her father suspicious, and Elizabeth herself might accuse me of confusing fiction with reality.

As I floundered, Elizabeth gave me a smile with the slightest tinge of sadness. “Father is here on official duties. I was hoping to see you.”

“M-Me...?!”

“I’m afraid I didn’t have enough time to notify you by letter ahead of time. I’m sorry for intruding unannounced.”

“No, think nothing of it. You wanted to see me that badly, did you?”

Elizabeth normally held manners in the highest regard. Without a proper invitation, she would be loath to visit the palace, and she would never overstep her bounds without due cause.

My words brought a beaming smile back to her face. “I wanted to deliver this to you, Prince Vincent.”

She pulled out a fine pouch of sewn leather, just big enough to fit in her palm. I accepted it with both hands, grazing her fingers for a heartbeat. Perhaps because my meeting with Lord Dominic was still fresh in my mind, her digits seemed especially elegant and shapely, as if they were sculpted from porcelain. I was almost afraid to linger on them for fear they would break.

The pouch she gave me had a decent bulk to it.

“Do you mind if I open it?” I asked.

“Please do! I do hope you’ll like it.”

Inside was a wad of cotton with a rabbit of lavender-tinted glass in the center. It was perched charmingly on its hind legs, its ears erect and on alert, much like the rabbit-shaped shrubs around us.

Strange... I wonder if this motif is in fashion?

“Isn’t it simply adorable?” Elizabeth chuckled. “A merchant arrived at the mansion the other day, and I couldn’t help myself. I bought my own as well.”

She procured a second pouch, and after easing it open, she pulled out a matching rabbit of a different hue.

No... Don’t tell me...!

“I’ll think of this little dear as I would you and keep him by my bedside. That... wouldn’t be overstepping my bounds, would it?” she asked, looking up at me with her big, round eyes.

AAAAGH! She beat me to it! And their colors match our eyes? This has to be the most romantic thing I’ve ever witnessed!

My knees nearly buckled, but I stayed up through sheer force of will. I gave her my most regal smile—the one I’d practiced for just such an occasion.

“Of course. Thank you for the wonderful gift. I’ll treat this loveable little rabbit just as I would you, Li— Elizabeth.”

Unfortunately, I couldn’t muster the courage to call her by her pet name with my future father-in-law watching. As my heart cried bitter tears of joy, Duke la Montlivere smiled warmly at us, and Harold stared at me with blank indifference.



FROM that day on, time flew like an arrow, and I kept Elizabeth’s rabbit hidden in my boot. I took it out whenever I had a free moment, admiring the light dancing off the figurine from every angle and remembering the way her

own would shine in the light, and before I knew it, the clock's hands would advance a startling degree. Every night that I observed the rabbit, it guaranteed a swift and deep sleep, one that left me totally refreshed the next morning. At one point, I asked Harold if it had a Blessing of love on it, but he flatly dismissed me.

A week after my meeting with Lord Dominic, Harold and I arrived at the Marshall mansion for dinner. The servants were terrified at the prospect of serving the crown prince. I felt for them, but as it was Lord Dominic's idea, I couldn't well refuse. With his assistance, Harold and I stole away from the palace to his mansion, and we planned to leave for the Norden mansion early the next morning. We timed it such that Edward would be absent when we arrived—I had heard he was invited to Lady Yulisse's again. It was a roundabout method, granted, but if the mastermind intended to frame House Norden, I had to be as discreet as possible.

"I just need to keep Edward occupied, correct?" Raphael confirmed as he ate, not looking up from his meal once. His posture and tone were different to the point where he seemed like another person entirely.

I suppose he puts a lid on his playboy act in front of his father.

"The Enhandt boy will be there too, won't he?" Lord Dominic mused.

"Yes, Father. I imagine Lucas and Edward are preparing gifts for the lady as we speak. I, of course, am opting for a simple bouquet." Despite his cool act, Raphael was likely more eager than the other two put together.

Lord Dominic nodded solemnly. "Good. They likely can't even imagine you'll be attending as His Royal Highness' eyes and ears. You've made me proud beyond words, my boy."

Raphael smiled reservedly. "Thank you for your most generous compliment, Father. I simply do what I can to serve king and country."

Strangely enough, modesty suited Raphael well.

I feel bad for letting my imagination run wild about their family dinners... This is plenty normal.

After dinner, I took a quick bath, got changed, and readied myself for bed

with help from House Marshall's servants. After Lord Dominic bid me good night, however, Raphael invited Harold and me to the parlor for a late-night snack, which we promptly accepted. Now that his father was absent, Raphael was back to his usual self.

"So?" I prompted. "Have you gotten any more information from Lady Yulisse?"

He raised an eyebrow at me. "You first. How are things with your sugary-sweet fiancée, hmm?"

"Same as always," Harold cut in.

"He was asking *me*, Harold." I cleared my throat proudly. "Look! We've been making excellent progress!"

I pulled the rabbit out of my breast pocket and proudly held it out to him. He spent a few solid seconds staring at it.

"Cute rabbit," he finally said.

"Is that it?"

"Yep. Am I wrong?"

Oh, so there's no Blessing on it after all... Stop nodding so smugly, Harold.

"I'm afraid Yulie and I haven't made any progress either," he said with a shrug and an overdramatic sigh. From his expression, he was genuinely disappointed. "It seems she's after you, after all."

"Me?" I blinked. "She has to know that isn't possible, even if that's what's written in that book. Even with her Charm—"

"Don't forget, she doesn't know she has a Blessing at all, and her knowledge of magic is basic. She honestly believes that she's a fairy-tale princess. Isn't that adorable?"

He chuckled, but I could tell his true feelings were a touch more complex than that. I couldn't understand, however—for as long as I could remember, my marriage with Elizabeth had been scripted out for me. I couldn't imagine a more complicated love life like his.

“You’re not seriously trying to seduce her, are you?” I asked.

“Why not? If she gave you up for me, wouldn’t that solve all our problems?”

“You... You would honestly *marry* her?!”

“She’s not a bad person, only misguided. Imagine, a little country girl being told that she’s the star of the whole Academy, and with mysterious charisma to boot. Who wouldn’t let loose a little?” He pursed his lips into a bemused smirk. “To be honest, I’m rather excited at the opportunity to, ah, *reeducate* her as a proper young lady.”

And there it is, his true goal. What a sadist.

Both Harold and I were a little put-off.



THE next morning, we departed the Marshall mansion in two carriages. The first carried Raphael, bound for Lady Yulisse’s little gathering. The second left a half-hour later and carried Lord Dominic, Harold, and myself to the Norden mansion.

Throughout the trip, not one of us breathed a word. We waited in silence as we rode out of the city into the surrounding countryside. The Norden mansion was every bit as utilitarian as its masters’ demeanor would suggest. The outer wall was a thick, undecorated bulwark that was ready for war, and small triangular windows were evenly spaced along the top.

The portcullis opened for us as we approached, and Lord Dominic was the first to dismount with a stern look on his face, closely followed by Harold and myself. While the servants would no doubt recognize the king, they showed no sign of identifying me as they bid us enter. They likely assumed I was Lord Dominic’s son.

The halls inside were the picture of the fortitude and strength House Norden stood for, and the servants were notably few. It felt oddly knightlike to be greeted with the utmost efficiency and the least possible fanfare. I’d heard rumors that even the Norden servants could take the average warrior to his knees.

We were asked to wait in a parlor decorated with polished suits of armor, and Count Zachary Norden arrived a few minutes later. The steward opened the door, and the count followed, arms outstretched, eager to meet his friend, the marquis. He froze as soon as he laid eyes on me.

“This is my *son*,” Lord Dominic asserted so that the count wouldn’t give me away. “He has long waited for the chance to meet you in person.”

Lord Zachary was visibly shaken, but after exchanging all the proper greetings, he dismissed the maids. Only he, Lord Dominic, Harold, the steward, and I remained.

“We heard that you bought a large Crystal recently,” Lord Dominic said. “My son would love the opportunity to study it with his own eyes.”

“Is that so?” The color began to return to his face. “Come to think of it, I did buy such a thing not long ago. I’d nearly forgotten about it.”

Judging from his reaction, he must have assumed I was there in secret to see the manacite, nothing more.

I knew it. He was deceived.

“I’ll have it brought right out.”

He ordered the steward to fetch it, and for a while, we chatted idly about the weather. A knock came at the door some time later. The steward returned and carefully laid the ornate brass box he was carrying on the table with a deep bow. Lord Zachary wasted no time in procuring a key and unlocking it, and as the polished lid rose, soft reflections of light danced across the room. A fist-sized translucent orb sat within. Colors danced across its surface as if it were crafted from mother-of-pearl. The light that passed through it took on a soft purple hue.

Lord Dominic cast it a disapproving look. Even I could tell that the stone had no magic to it at all.

“This is a fake,” I announced.

Lord Zachary’s eyes bulged. “Wh-What?!”

“Do you know how this could have happened, Lord Zachary?” I asked.

He gave me a blank look, even more aghast than when he had first entered the room. His gaze darted to Lord Dominic for help, but one look at the giant's furrowed brow was enough to realize no aid was coming.

"A-Are you quite sure it's fake, Your Royal Highness?" his voice trickled out, barely more than a whisper.

He and the steward exchanged terrified glances, and the steward seemed to be wordlessly asserting that he hadn't carried out the wrong box by mistake.

If this is an act, then they almost deserve to get away with it.

Lord Zachary realized his guests didn't share in his shock and took a deep breath. He'd surely been in no small number of scrapes before, and he pressed his temples and shook his head to clear his confusion. When his eyes met mine again, they were calm and composed once more.

"I gather you were expecting as much," he finally said.

His voice was laden with sadness and confusion, but vitality was returning to his features. The steward, likely the same age as him, looked every bit as tense as before.

Lord Dominic and I exchanged looks before I turned to Lord Zachary and nodded.

"By our estimates, the manacite is at the Merrifield mansion now."

Upon hearing the Merrifield name, the count's brow furrowed.

Lady Yulisse is troubling him that much, then?

"Did Edward take it?" he muttered.

"I don't think so," I replied. "Edward is drawn to Lady Yulisse by the manacite's Blessing, so the order of events would be all wrong."

"Then that means..."

I nodded. "Someone in your service must have snuck it out."

Lord Zachary's expression didn't change. If his son was innocent, then the most likely culprit was one of his servants. A sigh escaped his bearded lips.

"You have someone in mind, then?" I pressed.

“The manacite was stored in the north wing, in a room I keep under lock and key with my other valuables. However, the servants are allowed inside on occasion to clean.”

“But you have the only key to the box, don’t you?”

He shrugged weakly. “I always take time to read and keep a journal after lunch. Last spring, however, I fell asleep with my book. I remember it so well because one of my footmen woke me with panic in his eyes, asking me over and over if I was all right. I assumed I was tired, as I’d been doing field drills with the knights most of the previous day and attended a dinner party afterwards.”

“Who was the servant who woke you?”

“Walter is his name.” He turned to the steward. “Call him, will you?”

Lord Zachary sunk into the sofa with a heavy sigh. Had I not been there, I imagined he would’ve slumped straight off and onto the floor. His sense of justice and responsibility for his servants struck me as similar to Edward’s own disposition. He seemed outright appalled that this Walter fellow would do such a thing.

A few minutes later, the door opened to reveal a handsome young man in his twenties.

“Pardon me,” he said with a deep bow. As he straightened his posture and took stock of the room’s inhabitants, the reality of the situation seemed to hit him. He kept his face neutral, his shrewd gaze fixing first on the brass box that lay open on the table, then on the exhausted face of his lord. Finally, his eyes dropped to the floorboards.

It doesn’t seem like he’ll tell the truth easily.

At a glance, he was outright disrespectful of his master, but I could tell that there was more between them. If he was a simple traitor, he would’ve escaped along with the manacite. The fact that he was still here meant his actions were founded in loyalty to the count.

“What happened to the manacite?” I asked.

“I stole it and sold it on the spot,” Walter replied firmly. “I’ve already used the

money, so there's nothing to return."

It was a flimsy excuse and a well-rehearsed one. Lord Zachary watched Walter wordlessly, disappointment in his eyes. Walter pointedly avoided his gaze, glaring at me.

"Where did you sell it?" I pressed. "How did you get the sleeping drug you slipped Lord Zachary?"

"I procured the drug myself. I don't remember who I sold it to, either. As soon as I got my money, I forgot them." He clamped his lips shut, as if daring me to press him further.

Should I believe his claims, the most logical response would be to have him dragged off and tortured. He was prepared to protect House Norden's honor with his life.

"Please, Walter, tell him the truth," Lord Zachary pleaded. "This is—"

I raised my hand to cut him off before he revealed my identity. A ploy like that wouldn't work on a man like Walter. No, he was a textbook subordinate, prepared to die for his lord if necessary.

"I see how it is," I said, smiling faintly. "You're nothing but a miserable excuse for a servant."

Walter didn't say a word, but I caught a slight twitch in his brow. His eyes bore a smoldering dichotomy of agreement and denial.

At his core, he was no different from Harold. I knew Harold well enough to tell, but behind the grim and emotionless façade lay unwavering dedication to his lord. That would make breaking him simple.

"Don't you see the sorrow in Lord Zachary's eyes?" I pressed, a deathly calm to my voice. "How deeply your deceit has wounded him?"

Walter's brow furrowed even deeper. "*How dare this insolent, spoiled brat speak for my lord,*" he was no doubt thinking. I met his gaze with a hard look. I could read him like a book, and I was ready to prove it. He may be at the top of his class as a servant, but I was at the top of my class as a master.

"You see, Walter, you failed to convey your troubles to your lord—and you

dare say you would sacrifice yourself for him? Don't make me laugh. You're only in the service of your own ego," I sneered.

His ashen blue eyes flew open in shock. Such words carried horrible weight from a third party, more so than if Lord Zachary himself had said so.

"What did they tell you, hm?" I said, picking words to push him further. "Were they more trustworthy than the man who raised you? Is your master such a cruel soul that he would turn a blind eye to your misfortunes?"

Walter was sharply inhaling where he stood at the door across the room from us. His knees trembled faintly. His impeccable posture faltered for the first time. In the polished grain of the floor, I could see his fists ball, his shoulders tremble, and great tears of sorrow flow forth freely.

That...was far more effective than I thought it would be.

"Do you understand what you've done now?" I demanded.

House Norden was a knightly bloodline, and both Lord Zachary and Edward personified its values. Naturally, they would treat their servants with the same dignity and strength, and expect to be treated so in return. Especially with such a scant staff, they wanted only the best servants at their sides, those whom they trusted with every fiber of their beings. In return, Lord Zachary had one goal, one ideal he wanted to manifest: to be a master worthy of their trust. Walter had chosen poorly.

Or, being seen through so totally by a younger man he's never met before could be putting him in shock. Maybe both.

"I'm so sorry!" Walter sobbed, dropping to his knees. "I'll tell you everything... Everything...!"

Lord Zachary stood up and placed a firm hand on his shoulder, taking a knee before his own man. That in itself was a gesture of great humility. "I'm sorry I've been such a miserable master to you," he said, voice grim.

Oh, and there's the finishing blow. I'm sure he means it, but Lord Zachary is just as clueless as his son. Poor Walter.

Walter collapsed into a crying mess, pressing his forehead against the ground

in a gesture of remorse. “M-Milord...! Don’t apologize! My own callous naivete is to blame! It’s my fault, all of it! Not even a miserable maggot’s death could atone for the disrespect I’ve shown you!”

“No, it’s all my fault! If I was a better master, you never would have felt so lost and isolated!”

“M-Milord...!”

“Oh, Walter!”

“Erm.” Lord Dominic cleared his throat awkwardly. “Can we move on?”

Your son is every bit as strange, Lord Dominic. My parents are somewhat odd themselves, though... To each family, their own.



AFTER a lengthy battle of exchanged apologies, Walter was composed enough to say his piece. According to him, it began about four months prior. A visiting noble told Walter that Lord Zachary was under a terrible curse from the manacite and that his life force was being drained. The count himself was oblivious to the curse, and unless something was done, he might well perish. The only way to remove the curse was to give the manacite to a certain mage, and the task could only be undertaken by a man with undying devotion to his lord.

Walter, knowing next to nothing about manacite or curses, accepted the noble’s claims. He had seen the stone’s strange gleam and thought it very well could suck someone’s soul right out. Knowing that his master was enchanted by the manacite and wouldn’t part with it willingly, he swore to steal it, even if it cost him both his master’s trust and his place in the mansion. He would do anything for his lord.

He slipped Lord Zachary a sleeping drug he’d received from the noble and swapped out the manacite for a fake. The noble told Walter to transport the gem to said mage, and once the curse was lifted in six months’ time, he would return it to the mansion and nobody would be the wiser.

I was expecting as much, I thought.

Lord Zachary listened to Walter's tale with a mix of pain and sorrow.

The real question had yet to be answered, however. I looked straight into Walter's red, puffy eyes. "Who was the noble that deceived you? Who wanted you to steal the manacite?"

Walter pursed his lips for a moment. "All right. I'll tell you." He was shaking faintly from anxiety, but he returned my gaze nonetheless. "It was Duke Drewleid himself."

"What...?!"

The room fell silent. They were shocked that a duke, of all people, was the perpetrator. I was silent in order to maintain some semblance of princely demeanor.

Holy CRAP!

After a few long moments, Lord Dominic was the first to speak, his face scrunched up in disgust. "A duke, of all people... This complicates things."

He was right. Of course, Walter would take a duke's word at face value—or rather, a duke outranked not only House Norden but even House Marshall. If he defied a direct request from a duke, he might put his whole house at risk, and that would have been an ordeal in and of itself.

Lord Zachary's face scrunched up in a grave frown. "Duke Drewleid convinced me to buy the manacite in the first place."

"He's been planning this for quite some time, then," I concluded.

I resisted the urge to sigh. Going up against House Drewleid would require a great deal of cold, hard proof. Anything less, and we'd risk them cowering behind their authority and causing an even larger mess in the process. Lords Dominic and Zachary were no doubt of the same mind as they grew lost in thought.

"Well, at least we know where the manacite came from," I announced. "The problem is, how did it get to House Merrifield? And how do we prove House Drewleid did it?"

"I will need to track down the engraver and the incanter," Lord Dominic

replied.

I nodded. As long as we lacked concrete evidence, our only hope was to get as many testimonies as possible. Lord Zachary and Walter's voices alone wouldn't be enough. We had to at least find proof that House Drewleid commissioned a first-class taboo Blessing engraved, or they'd get away with everything.

"Now then, Lord Zachary Norden, about your punishment for this incident—"

"I shall accept any consequence you would have milord suffer!" Walter cut in. "I beg you, allow him to walk free!"

"Out of the question," Lord Zachary said with a firm shake of his head. "My carelessness caused this predicament. Punish me and me alone, Your Royal Highness!"

They both fixed me with large, pleading eyes, begging me to punish one and spare the other. I stifled a heavy sigh.

"...As I was saying, I will not be punishing anyone at this time. You're both free to return to your regular lives. But you must keep on *as normal*. Even the slightest suspicious activity may reach Duke Drewleid's ears. Pretend this entire affair never happened. Once this conspiracy is safely laid to rest, I'll pardon you both formally."

Walter seemed as desperate as before, evidently not fully grasping what I meant. "But please...!"

Lord Zachary's eyes flew open. He understood that I never intended to punish anyone in the first place, and I could count on him to explain that to Walter later.

"Oh, and one more thing, Lord Zachary," I added. "Make sure Walter doesn't banish himself out of regret or anything ridiculous like that."

"Of course, Your Royal Highness." Following Walter's suit, the count bowed his head deeply.

Well, not only did we dig a few things up, I've got a better grasp of the full picture now.

There was plenty that I could do to gather information on House Drewleid,

and Lord Dominic had a mage to track down.

Oh, and I suppose I should let Father and Mother know. The Drewleids are, technically, our relatives...

As I imagined the unpleasant conversation ahead, Lord Dominic drew the wrong conclusion altogether and cast me a soft look of pity.



“JUST to be clear, I would *never* fall for that.”

As we rode back, Harold broke the silence. He wasn't the type to say anything but that which was necessary, and he almost never started a conversation. It took me a long moment to realize he was referring to the tactic I used to get Walter to talk.

Ah, so he figured out how I knew that trick. Is he some sort of mind reader now? No, he's always been scarily insightful... Oof.

“I know that,” I assured him.

If he was the type to fall for that trick, I wouldn't have him by my side, and he wouldn't be privy to all my secrets. His job was to ensure I didn't get carried away, and he had honed his frosty gaze for precisely that purpose. Besides, House Abarakoff was one of the best-connected noble families, so even if he did find himself in Walter's shoes, he would've been able to have the manacite analyzed and dealt with himself if necessary. He wouldn't rely on an outsider's help, and he'd do it without tarnishing my name in the slightest. I knew that he wasn't referring to that part either, of course.

“I know,” I repeated, but Harold's only reply was silence.

Chapter 4: Behind the Scenes

BY the end of the next week, rumors of Lady Yulisse had spread throughout the Academy, despite nobody being bold enough to discuss them openly. It was only natural that word would spread—despite being a mere baron’s daughter, three higher nobles’ sons were constantly by her side. Future Marquis Lucas Enhandt, future Marquis Raphael Marshall, and future Count Edward Norden were the children of some of the most powerful men in the kingdom, and each was all but guaranteed a place at the future king’s side. Some spoke of the so-called Star Maiden in whispered awe, while others exchanged theories about the crooked means she’d used to gain such an entourage.

The only thing that could be said for certain was that Lady Yulisse herself wore a dour expression. None of her schoolmates had the courage to approach her, instead observing from afar. I couldn’t blame them—any lower noble with such palpable influence fostered an air of lofty unapproachability. Plenty of noblewomen held her in the highest regard, but they knew how keenly Lady Yulisse was at the center of attention, and their upbringings had instilled in them the importance of avoiding controversy. None of them dared approach her.

There was something else grating on her nerves just as much. As I passed the group, I spied Raphael smirking as Lady Yulisse’s smile grew strained.

“I’ve got a new spell I’d love to put on you the next time we’re alone together!” he whispered intoxicatingly.

Ah, so he’s in full playboy mode when he’s with her as well.

From the way the corners of Lady Yulisse’s mouth were twitching, she was regretting having ever strung him along. Edward and Lucas were more conservative with their expressions, but they were every bit as disgusted with his manners as she was. They could not in good conscience leave the two of them alone, and so they clung together as a bunch of grapes might.



Anyone who noticed their bizarre dynamic lacked the courage to draw closer, and Lady Yulisse's Charm weakened as a result.

I knew Raphael would have a plan for her nasty little Blessing. This... This is all just a highly calculated plan, isn't it? Please tell me that's it.

Lady Yulisse had to be ill at ease. According to the novel, Elizabeth and her friends should be bullying her all the worse now—and yet Elizabeth refused to antagonize her in the slightest, and while the other noblewomen were cautious, they would often side with Lady Yulisse, not against her. While it was still common to believe Lady Yulisse was the Star Maiden, many were beginning to doubt that Elizabeth was a villainess by any measure.

Only three months remained until the Coming-of-Age Ball. Before that, I was both shackled and liberated. Nothing major was slated to occur until then, and the masterminds at House Drewleid had little choice but to leave everything to Lady Yulisse herself. If I could secure hard evidence against them before the ball, I would win—and with any luck, the time limit would pressure Lady Yulisse into slipping up.



IF Lady Yulisse made a move, I would be her target. As such, I spent my time after school in the same classroom in which she and Edward had caught me previously. I had made every effort to avoid them in the past, but I couldn't afford to do so now. Beside me, Harold was making swift grasping motions at the air, practicing snatching Lady Yulisse if she were to try to grab me again. I spent my time muttering to myself about Elizabeth. If Harold's report was accurate, she was continuing to placate her friends and prevent them from moving against Lady Yulisse even now.

"Once this entire affair is over, I'll take Elizabeth to the circus on that date I've always dreamed of," I muttered.

Harold stopped and looked at me. "Saying such things is bad luck, Your Royal Highness."

"Oh, enough. How are things going with your crush, anyway?"

My hands were too full to investigate his would-be girlfriend—or rather, my

informants all reported to me through Harold, so I would have to start by finding a new spy, and one that Harold wouldn't discover.

At my words, his expression turned a touch more apathetic than usual. "I see her more than you see your fiancée, at least."

"Do you have to put it so cruelly?"

I pursed my lips as I mulled over my bad luck. By this point, Elizabeth and I should be getting better acquainted.

Maybe I'll put this topic to rest for a while.

All I had to do was wait for Lady Yulisse to appear—and luckily, it took only a few short days.



WHEN Lady Yulisse arrived at the classroom, she was accompanied by another noblewoman, one whom I recognized from Elizabeth's study group. Her gaze was dropped low, her shoulders slumped, and her prior energy was a mere memory. She had come with Lady Yulisse. My eyes widened.

Et tu, Brutus?

"Um... Your Royal Highness?" she said falteringly. "I have something to confess."

Harold was ready to pounce, but Lady Yulisse made no move to approach me, nor even call my name. The noblewoman fell to her knees, clasping her hands before her chest as she looked at my shoes. It was a pose specifically reserved for confessions. Lady Yulisse put an encouraging hand on the girl's shoulder, strengthening Charm's pull in the process.

"I am afraid that this news may come as a shock to you," the lady continued.

"Go on," I replied, though I didn't care what she had to say.

"I was the one who vandalized Lady Yulisse's belongings. Lady Elizabeth ordered me to do so."

"She did...?" My expression grew dire, and I clenched my fists as though I believed her lies.

My angel would NEVER hurt ANYONE like that, liar!

It took everything I had not to call out the vixen's lies right then and there. I gritted my teeth in restraint.

Maybe I'm not as good at separating truth from fiction as I thought... This is hard to stomach.

Harold stepped forward from behind me. He leaned over the young noblewoman, his hand taking Lady Yulisse's place on the girl's shoulder. "You were very brave to come forward about this."

His voice was heartfelt and kind, as if to forgive her sins and commend her for her courage. He'd never once talked to me with such overwhelming warmth.

"What Lady Elizabeth did is unbefitting of anyone who would marry His Royal Highness," he continued. "Your bravery may well save the royal family." Harold shot me a sidelong glare.

"Y-Yes," I stammered along, just as I had rehearsed. "Well done."

The lady looked up at me with tears in her eyes. Noble society was highly hierarchical and calling out a superior so boldly—especially when said call-out was a *filthy, bald-faced lie*—took significant resolve. That could only be attributed to Lady Yulisse's Charm. I had to free the poor girl from the curse's thrall. Fortunately, Harold's and my responses convinced Lady Yulisse her little ploy was successful. She smiled confidently and took a step back.

"I shan't punish you for such courage," I told the lady imperiously. "I shall handle this affair in its entirety. Would that be acceptable to you, Lady Yulisse?"

Lady Yulisse nodded. "Of course! In fact, I was going to ask you not to punish her myself. Lady Elizabeth is at fault, not her victims."

Her lines were identical to those in *Star Maiden*, and I could tell from her fluency that she had rehearsed them. In the novel, such "kindness" melts the prince's heart, and from there, he overcomes his prejudice against the common folk.

Agh, my face is about to cramp up! How dare she address my beloved Elizabeth so callously?! Didn't Harold's warning get through your thick skull?!

And how dare you act so cocky with every tiny win!

Fortunately, the farce of a scene was almost over. It was easy from there.

“You’re too kind,” I told her.

“Speaking of which, Your Royal Highness, I’ve heard a number of unsavory things about Lady Elizabeth myself,” Harold added.

“What?!” I gaped, pretending to be shocked. That was the same line the prince’s servant said at the start of chapter eight. In the book, the exchange took place when they were alone in the palace, but we needed to make sure Lady Yulisse knew the tale was proceeding as she wanted it to.

On cue, Lady Yulisse’s eyes brightened with glee, forgetting about the poor noblewoman. Said noble seemed to clue in that she was only a bit player in this scene, and so she simply watched us and waited in silence.

I’ll have to find her and ask her about this once she’s no longer Charmed.

For good measure, I smiled at Lady Yulisse again. “Perhaps I don’t know what true love is after all... I hope we can talk again.”

She smiled giddily. “Of course! I’ll look forward to it, Prince Vincent!”

Hold on. I never said you can use my name...and just to be clear, I know exactly what true love is, okay?

Harold had already retreated to his place behind me so I couldn’t see his face, but he was no doubt glowering again. A faint shiver ran up my spine.

“Anyhow, thank you very much for seeing us!” Lady Yulisse continued. “I’d best be going now.”

She curtsied and turned to leave the room, but at that moment, the doorknob turned, and the door popped open. Raphael’s head popped in.

He timed this just right, didn’t he? Don’t tell me he can see through walls with magic?

“Hey there, Yulie!” he cooed.

“Ugh!” she groaned in a manner unfit for the Star Maiden, the gleeful rosy tinge dropping from her cheeks. The past few minutes were so perfectly

according to the plot, she must have been caught off-guard by this sudden turn.

Raphael didn't seem to notice. "Who knew you'd be hiding in a place like this! I've been looking eeeverywhere for you. I even got rid of those two noisemakers, so why don't we go home together? Just you and me?"

"O-Oh, my... You really didn't have to come looking for me..."

Her voice wavered; she was no doubt sure she had shaken him off. He took her hand and eagerly escorted her away, her shoulders trembling uneasily.

"G-Good evening, then," she stammered as she vanished behind the door.

"Bye-bye!" Raphael called to us. Then he spoke to Lady Yulisse in a subdued voice, "Where do you want to go first, then? We'll have my private carriage all to ourselves, but we could also..."

The door closed, and Raphael's voice grew more and more distant. I couldn't hear Lady Yulisse's reply, but escape plans were likely running through her head.

Even after the two left, none of us said a word. Harold and I stood awkwardly in the middle of the room while the noblewoman remained on her knees.

Why does it feel like we've been totally left behind?

Harold was the first to move, letting out a heavy sigh.

"I was expecting this to happen," he said. "I'm glad I came prepared."

With that, he pulled out a pillow—a full-sized, poofy pillow packed with plush down and lined with delicate white lace.

What? A pillow? Where was he even keeping that?

"Thanks," the lady replied flatly as she climbed to her feet and took it from him. She took a deep breath, balled her fist, wound up, then slugged the pillow with a hard right.

PWUFF!!

The sheer force of her blow reverberated through my body from several feet away.

Huh? That's...terrifying.

The lady beat the pillow with blow after blow while Harold watched impassively.

“That *bitch!*” she cried, smashing it like a battering ram before following up with a heavy knee-kick.

The pillow flew into the wall and dully bounced off. She ran up and snatched it out of the air. Her hair was in disarray, her breathing as ragged as a wild animal’s as she clutched at it. The now-lumpy sack of feathers let out a thin wailing sound as she moved to tear it clean in half, but she stopped and sighed just before dealing the killing blow.

“No... I don’t wish to kill you. This isn’t what you were born for, you poor thing.”

“You’re too kind,” Harold said, echoing my line from minutes ago.

Um... I’m not sure what’s going on, and I’m almost afraid to ask.

She handed the pillow back to Harold, gave me a polite curtsy, and took a deep breath. Then, without stopping, she said, “I’m dreadfully sorry you had to witness that, Your Royal Highness. I am Count Falming’s daughter, Margaret. Lord Harold ordered me to protect Lady Elizabeth, but that treacherous witch—er, Lady Yulisse—approached me with a deal. She asked me to lie to your face in exchange for the title of marquess when she becomes queen, so I did as I was told. I pray you will understand.”

“Er... That’s a lot to process.”

She didn’t reply. I got the gist of it, so I decided to parse it one step at a time.

“So, Harold requested you be one of Lady Elizabeth’s bodyguards, and Lady Yulisse didn’t know that when she asked you to be her accomplice?”

“Precisely. I can vouch for that lying fox—er, Lady Yulisse’s—treacherous claims if you wish.” She put a hand to her chest in mock testimony.

Oh, I see—now I can prove Lady Yulisse is trying to defame Elizabeth. No matter what Lady Yulisse says, I can prevent damage to Elizabeth’s good name.

“I must admit, that Charm is a nasty piece of work,” Margaret continued. “Had Lord Harold not warned me, I might not have been able to fight against it.

I found myself thinking that black-hearted weasel was charming enough to *want* to help her.”

“Language,” Harold reminded her sternly.

“Oops.” Margaret put a hand to her mouth in feigned apology.

I take it Harold readied the pillow for when Margaret was no longer Charmed, then. I'll have to ask him later where he was keeping it...

“Why don’t you take tomorrow off?” Harold suggested flatly as he tucked the pillow under his arm. “I’ll take notes for your classes.”

She had been in contact with the Charm for far longer than Harold had—Harold had only experienced a fleeting touch, while Lady Yulisse had rested her hand on Margaret’s shoulder. Resisting it had to be exhausting.

“What?” Margaret scoffed. “Who’ll protect Lady Elizabeth, then?”

“Lady Aiden will still be there.”

Wait, there are more guards?

“I know, but what if something happens while I’m away? I can’t let Aiden be the only one keeping an eye on Lady Elizabeth. That’s just sloppy.”

“Lady la Montlivere herself wouldn’t want you pushing yourself.”

“That’s...um...”

“If you feel tired, rest. Understood? Collapsing in front of your charge would turn House Falming into a laughingstock.”

“Okay, okay, you win. I guess Lady Elizabeth wouldn’t want that...” She shrugged halfheartedly before turning to me. “It was a pleasure, Your Royal Highness. I wish you luck in exposing that bad apple—I mean, Lady Yulisse for the evildoer she is.”

“Thank you,” I said with a princely nod. “Guard Elizabeth well.”

I made it clear with my eyes what would happen if she failed to cover for Elizabeth in any way, shape, or form. Fortunately, she seemed every bit as expectant of me on the Elizabeth front as my parents were. She’d give it her all, for certain.

She bowed deeply in a way that demonstrated just how solid her core muscles were before leaving the room. As soon as she left, Harold sighed.

“My apologies. House Falming gets a tad too emotional about their charge. I suppose it’s both a weakness and a strength.”

“I don’t mind. I’m curious: how many guards does Elizabeth have?”

“One from your parents when your engagement was first announced, and a second when it became clear you were head-over-heels for her. When you ordered a guard put on her after starting at the Academy, the count became three. Finally, when you ordered the guard increased, I added Margaret and Aiden—they are both trained against assassinations, should such an eventuality arise. Rest assured, all five are women.”

“Wait... Does that mean Elizabeth’s study group is...?”

“Half of them are secretly her bodyguards, yes.”

Oh, I see. So I have one, and she’s constantly surrounded by five. She should be safe. Perfectly safe. I don’t feel more isolated from her at all. Is it just me, or is that a lonely lovebird singing outside the window?

“Are you upset?” Harold asked unaffectedly.

“No. I was thinking of how deeply Elizabeth is loved.”

Father loves her more than me, that much is sure.

Based on Lady Margaret’s actions, she valued Elizabeth as far more than just her charge. She was surrounded by friends and earnestly enjoying her life at the Academy, even though I wasn’t at her side. Her safety was all I could ask for... right?

As I grappled with the complex mélange of feelings inside me, Harold left my side to open the classroom door and stood ready.

He believes we should head home, then?

“Yes... You’re right.”

I still had Harold—my half-brother and aide from birth, and a man I would never hesitate to call a friend. I felt oddly sentimental as I stepped forward to

follow him—until I realized he still had the pillow hugged tightly under one arm.

“What are you doing with that?”

“Taking it home.”

“...Just out of curiosity, who is Lady Margaret to you?”

“She’s a fellow servant and childhood friend,” he replied with an air of finality, daring me to push him further. Lacking the guts to challenge his claim, I left the room in silence.



AFTER returning to the palace, Harold and I double-checked *Star Maiden* to see what came next. The crown prince, infatuated with the heroine’s earnest nature, talks to her more often. At that point, the villainess catches them together, and she begins bullying the heroine directly. Most of the ninth chapter is about the heroine tolerating the villainess’ abuse. Then, in the climactic tenth chapter, the prince reveals the villainess’ misdeeds, breaks off their engagement, and gets together with the heroine.

“I hope Lord Dominic finds the evidence we need before then,” I mumbled.

Lady Yulisse would doubtlessly go after Elizabeth at the Coming-of-Age Ball. I could stop her easily enough, but I still couldn’t lay a finger on House Drewleid.

“The Lord Dominic informed me he has been checking every possible workshop one by one, but chances remain slim,” Harold informed me.

“I was afraid of that.”

Nobody would admit to incanting a Curse, so he would have to investigate every mage and transaction to make any progress. According to Lady Margaret, the reason why Lady Yulisse continued to play along with the novel despite things slowly unraveling was that if she saw the scenario through, she would end up as queen. In other words, when Raphael said she was aiming for me, he meant the throne. So House Drewleid’s ultimate goal was to place her on the throne.

But why? What would they have to gain?

I scratched my head in frustration, and Harold’s brow furrowed.

Duke Drewleid was a pretentious snob, but I thought him too petty to pose a threat. He didn't seem the type to lay such an elaborate plan, let alone one that would shake the kingdom to its core should it succeed.

"I don't get it," I sighed as I cast the book aside and made for my closet. Harold circled around me to get the heavy door.

It was nearly dinnertime, and I was about to instruct Harold to help me into something more fitting than my school clothes when there was a knock. Harold opened the door readily, and after exchanging words with whoever was there, returned to my side. He bowed with a hand to his chest as he relayed the message.

"His Majesty says dinner will be delayed somewhat. It seems Lady la Montlivere will be in attendance as well."

"I'll need my dress clothes—the new ones," I immediately replied.

Oh, now I wish I hadn't mussed up my hair...

I made myself presentable with Harold's help, and I rushed to the dining hall, where Elizabeth was waiting for me. She was standing as if to greet me, but Mother's spot at the table across from mine was already set for her.

"Thank you for your most generous invitation," she said.

Most of her golden curls fell softly about her shoulders, while the rest were neatly tied behind her with a ribbon. While her hair was unfit for a formal function, her natural beauty drew a sort of elegance out of it, such that it was more than suitable for an audience with a crown prince. Her lavender mermaid dress was devoid of gemstones and instead decorated with tiered frills, which served as the perfect accent.

I'm so glad I had new dress clothes tailored.

I was wearing a monotone suit jacket with fine embroidery, refined enough that I didn't seem totally out of place beside such a goddess.

"I'm glad you came," I replied, still grasping the situation but pretending to be responsible for politeness' sake. "I was hoping to see you again."

"We invited her," Father cut in flatly, dashing my façade. "We understand you

must be busy, Lady Elizabeth, but Our son has a matter he would like to discuss with you.”

He shot me a sidelong glance, and everything came together. This meeting was prepared for me. Getting to eat with my darling Elizabeth was a blessing in and of itself, but this was a prime opportunity to hear about recent developments in the Academy from her perspective. With any luck, she could provide me with valuable insight into this ordeal.

“I’m flattered to have been invited, Your Majesty.” She smiled warmly at him. “It’s a great honor to see you and your son under any circumstances.”

Father seemed unfazed, but I knew he was melting over her divine demeanor on the inside. Outside, he solemnly cleared his throat, pushed his chair back, and stood.

“Our apologies, but We are inordinately busy. We will take Our leave here.”

That was a lie. He wanted to give us a chance to eat together, especially since Mother was out for the evening. He’d take his dinner in a different room. Elizabeth, naturally unaware of our family’s somewhat unusual workings, curtsied deeply and remained low until Father had left the room.

“Why don’t we sit down?” I suggested. “You must be hungry.”

“Of course, Your Royal Highness. It would be my honor.”

With a word from me, the servants brought out our dinner. I asked Elizabeth to tell me what her friends had been up to, a matter that she delved into with great vigor and detail. One of them was especially kind; another was talented at mathematics; and yet another was adept at making sweets. She went on for some time about how charming they all were, unaware that she outshone them all. I couldn’t come out and tell her as such, but it brought a faint smile to my lips.

“You have quite a few friends, don’t you, Liza?”

“They treat me so well. I’m admittedly somewhat jealous of your own unique companions, Prince Vince.”

“Er... Thank you.” I chuckled dryly.

And she hasn't even met Raphael... Though I suppose Edward and Harold are odd in their own ways.

Harold was drilling holes in the back of my head with his eyes, so I cleared my throat and changed the subject. "Come to think of it, your family is quite close with House Drewleid and House Ieuta, isn't it?"

"Yes...um..." Her gaze wandered.

I'd never seen her struggle so much with a topic. That convinced me that this was the hint Father was hoping I would receive.

"We often exchange seasonal gifts with Duke Ieuta," she finally continued. "As for Duke Drewleid, I recall that my parents exchange letters with him on occasion."

In other words, their relationship with House Drewleid is somewhat strained.

That was hardly unusual—even the royal family avoided inviting them to balls and salons, given how insufferable they were. Especially since they were fellow dukedoms and both related to the royals to similar degrees, maintaining the exact right distance had to be difficult. I understood their pain all too well—and yet, there seemed to be something more to Elizabeth's hesitation.

"Did something happen between you?" I asked.

"Well...nothing I would call especially relevant..."

Her unusual choice of words thickened the intrigue. Something had happened, then. Even the servants stopped in their tracks, uncertain if they should proceed.

"Could you tell me?" I urged gently.

"It's nothing that I would want to trouble you with."

"Is it something that you would keep secret from your own fiancée, Liza?"

Inwardly, I was kicking myself.

How can I use my position to coerce her so callously? Why can't I think of any other way? I'm such a wretch.

"Well..." She remained starkly upright in her seat, her eyes squarely meeting

my own. She released her cutlery nervously, as though she were conscious of being in a royal's presence.

Father had left for more reasons than one. It was taboo to besmirch another house in the presence of the king. Both Elizabeth and her father cherished their relationship with the royal family, and they were loath to risk that so easily.

Oh, this is a mess. I have no intention of repeating anything she says to Father, but how do I convince her of that?

"I'm sorry," I apologized. "The last thing I want is to force you to speak against another. I was hoping that if you told me, I might be able to support you better. I don't want there to be any secrets between us."

In the end, all I could think of was the truth. I was curious about House Drewleid, but my priority was figuring out what was eating at her.

She gave me a startled look. "My apologies, Prince Vince. I have no intention of hiding anything from you."

I shook my head. "No, I was wrong for pressuring you. You have no obligation to tell me if you don't want to."

In the worst case, I could beg and grovel to Father later, and he might be willing to tell me whatever I needed to know. Elizabeth's eyes found new resolve, however, and the sheer strength of the will in her gaze set my heart aflutter.

"I'll tell you...but please don't think I still hold untoward feelings about House Drewleid."

"All right, I promise."

The heartbeat pounding in my ears grew louder. I hadn't expected her to be so assertive and straightforward. I hid my anxiety and smiled gently to show her I would readily accept anything she had to say. On the inside, I wanted to cover my ears and beg her to wait. I wasn't ready, but if she was mustering the courage to be honest with me, it was only fair that I match her resolve.

As I struggled to keep my expression even, Elizabeth returned a modest smile before deliberately speaking.

“Once, Duke Drewleid asked if I would be willing to marry his eldest son, Lars.”

“He *what?*”

I...I had no idea. House Drewleid sent her offers of engagement, too? Father has to know about this...

“But... I’m afraid I was quite against the whole affair.”

“Wh-Wh-When was this?” I stammered awkwardly.

Her smile sagged somewhat. “Before I was engaged to you.”

“Okay.” I nodded, but no other words would come out.

Wait, should I be smiling this much? Smiling was acceptable before, but now? I know I shouldn’t be mad, as I hadn’t even met her back then, but I’ve no idea what manners would dictate here. Maybe I should cry? Crying sounds good. Would she mind if I cried?

She had met with other men. I had convinced myself that, given our houses’ circumstances, we had been engaged since birth. I hadn’t considered any other possibilities—and yet, not only did Elizabeth have the option to be another man’s wife, *she chose me*. I was so inexplicably relieved, I felt ready to collapse into a sobbing mess.

I really do love her, don’t I?

“I’m glad you turned him down,” I said.

Elizabeth’s expression didn’t lighten. “I was too young back then, and far too selfish. I feel miserable whenever I think back on it.”

“But if you didn’t, we wouldn’t be here now, together.”

Just saying it aloud made my chest tighten. I kept smiling, but my eyebrows knitted in discomfort. I had to look awful, but at least I was earnest.

“Thank you, Prince Vince.”

Even as she said so, I could tell she was hiding her true feelings. Tears had crept into the corners of her eyes. She was serious and earnest to a fault, and regret had plagued her for many years. Yet, as selfish as she claimed to have

been as a child, she was no less an angel then than she was now. She was born a goddess, and her spurned potential fiancé no doubt felt leagues worse than she did.

“...If you don’t mind, could you tell me what it was about Lars that was so off-putting?” I inquired.

The last thing I wanted was to make the same mistakes he did, after all.

Elizabeth pondered my question, but evidently decided there was no point in hiding it. “When we first met, he flipped a tray of desserts our family’s patisserie had crafted for us. I...I cried. That only made him more upset. He grabbed my dress and yanked on my hair.”

“How horrible...”

“Before I realized it, I’d slapped him across the face.”

“Serves him right.”

“Hm?” She blinked at me in surprise.

“Er... Violence is unacceptable, I mean. You were both in the wrong.”

To be honest, I was glad she’d stood up for herself.

And I DON’T want her to slap me. D-Definitely not. I don’t want her to divorce me for being a sexual deviant, after all.

She nodded. “No, violence is never the answer. In the end, neither of us was blamed since we were both children, but the engagement talks ended then and there.”

Naturally. Besides, Lars had gone too far, and the argument was a perfect reason for House la Montlivere to cut things off.

“Ever since then, I’ve worked hard to better myself and never commit such a deed again. So please, don’t think of me any less because of it.” Her gaze dropped, her shoulders trembling faintly with fear.

“Of course not. Why should I? Who would hold what you did as a child against you? I’ve been with you long enough to know how wonderful you are.”

She looked up at me, her cheeks rosy and a peaceful smile across her face. My

heart nearly stopped, but I returned a smile with some level of composure.

For the first time, I felt as though I understood the true history of the *Star Maiden* debacle. To House Drewleid, Elizabeth was nothing more than a brat who slapped their eldest son and dumped him for a prince. As ill-founded as their perceptions were, they were conceited enough to hold a grudge—especially as they saw themselves as royalty to begin with.

“Honestly, some people refuse to let the past go,” I muttered to myself with a sigh as I took my cutlery in hand once more. The duck I had been eating had grown cold with our conversation, so a servant used the opportunity to replace it with a warm portion.

“Well...about that,” she began.

I was referring to House Drewleid, but as Elizabeth knew nothing of their involvement in the *Star Maiden* issue, she got the wrong idea.

She continued in a whisper as a servant replaced her plate as well, “Lord Lars continues to send me letters of apology, even to this day. Father always replies in my stead, of course, but still...”

I nearly spat out my food. The troubled look on her face said it all. It suddenly became clear why Father wanted us to have dinner together. She didn’t seem to understand why Lars would do such a thing, but after all she had told me, there was only one horrifying conclusion to be drawn. I wouldn’t be getting a wink of sleep that night, no doubt about it.

Lars loves Elizabeth, and she hasn’t caught on in the slightest.



“**I’M** convinced that the true mastermind is none other than Lars Drewleid, Duke Drewleid’s eldest son.”

“H-Huhh?! L-Lord Lars?!”

Lady Selena visibly balked at my announcement, going white as a sheet. We were talking in a salon—one with a barrier such that we couldn’t be overheard.

“I’ve known that for a full week now, Your Royal Highness,” Harold added flatly.

Raphael nodded. “His Majesty tipped you off, didn’t he?”

None of the others seemed surprised. Harold was present at my dinner with Elizabeth, and Raphael had probably heard from Lord Dominic, who had heard from Father. It had taken me a full week to accept that I was in a love triangle of sorts.

Would it kill you to show me some compassion?

I shot them both a glare, but that only made Lady Selena more flustered, so I cleared my throat and put the conversation back on track.

“Lars is two years my senior—in other words, he’s in your year, Lady Selena. That’s why I have opted to turn to you for aid.”

“O-Ohh... Makes sense!”

She nodded eagerly, brimming with nervous excitement. I understood why there were rumors that she was a nervous wreck around any nobles higher than herself. It wasn’t helping that Raphael was surreptitiously inching closer to her on the couch as we talked, and she was on the verge of having to sit on the floor. I cast Harold a look, and he wordlessly made Raphael stand up and find a new place to sit. Status-wise, Lady Selena should have been the one to move, but the sheer disappointment on Raphael’s face was enough to dispel any sympathy I felt for him.

Lady Selena gave Harold a startled look, every bit as nervous around the count-to-be. “Um, thank you! E-Er, sorry? Thank you?” She took a few deep breaths after he sat down before continuing. “S-Speaking of Lord Lars, I’ve seen and heard a few things that made it sound like he was using my book. He’s the only person I know who’s come out and said Lady Yulisse looks like the Star Maiden. I remember because I was so surprised that he read it. H-He even recommended I read it...” She blushed happily.

That clearly meant a lot to her.

“Lord Lars may be responsible for its popularity amongst nobility in the first place,” Harold added. “If memory serves, he claimed wanting a *Star Maiden* play multiple times in banquets and balls.”

Ah, I get it now. I had thought a diehard fan had instigated the plays, but if a

duke with close ties to the king—or so they claim—advocated it themselves, the cast would feel more comfortable doing it.

“Anything else you’d care to add, Lady Selena?” I asked.

“Y-Yes, well, there’s one more thing...”

From the way she was talking, she had multiple points to make. She clenched her fists, casting several awkward glances my way as she worked up the courage to speak.

Uh-oh. I’m getting a bad feeling about this.

“W-Well... I think L-Lord Lars might I-like Lady Elizabeth...”

“I know.”

Drat, I knew it! I knew it!

I never asked what their contents were, but the fact that he was still sending Elizabeth letters like a man possessed made it clear enough. Furthermore, if her father was answering the letters, it wasn’t a matter that could simply end with her forgiveness. That was only his first step toward “rebuilding” their relationship. I thought a week was enough time to come to terms with everything, but hearing it spoken was a heavy blow.

“Oh? What’s got you all bothered?” Raphael asked with a smirk. “You’re the one engaged to her, aren’t you? She’s as good as yours, so why care about him?”

“His Royal Highness has a great deal of insecurity in that regard,” Harold stated.

“So you don’t like that she had other suitors, is that it? Or do you not like how other men find Lady Elizabeth so attractive?”

“Regardless, he seems determined to keep her.”

“Will you two be quiet?!” I snapped at them.

I was almost relieved that Raphael and Harold were finally getting along, but not if they were going to gang up on me.

Are you my aides or aren’t you? Stop heckling and start supporting!

The truth was that Raphael had hit the nail on the head perfectly.

Since Lady Selena was beginning to panic again, I turned my attention back to the topic at hand.

“So? What makes you think Lars is in love with Elizabeth?”

“Um... After Lord Lars brought up my novel, I got curious and followed him for a while. It was then that I noticed how much he looked at Lady Elizabeth.”

Uh-oh.

“Assuming Your Royal Highness looks at her 100 times a minute, he looks at her...umm...103.”

“What...?!” I muttered.

I lost to him? No, impossible. It's just because I've been avoiding contact with her at school. The less I look at her, the less I obsess. Yes, that's it. I don't love her less than him or anything unthinkable like that. Why, without this whole mess, I'd never take my eyes off her, ever!

Lady Selena noticed that I was frozen in place with a serious expression and arms folded, and tears welled up in her eyes again.

“I-I'm so sorry! I never should have—”

“It's not your fault,” Harold cut her off. “That was necessary information for pinpointing Lord Lars' motive.”

“Um... If you say so...” She looked back to me, and I smiled to show her it really was fine. She let out a whimper of surprise that didn't hurt my ego in the slightest.

“Moving on to Lord Lars himself,” Harold continued, “it seems that he has been absent from school for several months now.”

He glanced at Lady Selena for confirmation, and she nodded. “One of our teachers told me that Lord Lars was sick at home, and that he's being privately tutored until he feels well enough to return to school.”

“He doesn't want to get involved in the Academy's conflicts, then,” I concluded.

After all, if he stayed at home and influenced Lady Yulisse's actions from afar, he could feign ignorance more easily.

"Oh, about that!" Lady Selena added. "He's going to be at the Coming-Of-Age Ball. I saw the attendance list, and his name was at the very top."

"Is that so?"

"He wants to witness the grand climax himself?" Raphael mused. "It sounds like the perfect time to ensnare him, then."

My thoughts exactly.

Lady Selena seemed a little lost, but Raphael looked right at me without answering her.

"So? Do you feel ready for this?"

"Of course."

Of course not.

Nonetheless, we lacked one critical piece of evidence—proof that Lars was pulling Lady Yulisse's strings. To get that, we needed to make them think I was playing into their hands, and that I was following the scenario as written. The next major event would have me talking alone with Lady Yulisse. Through idle banter, we would realize our similarities and grow closer.

Ugh, just thinking about it disgusts me.

Since I hated the idea of it so much, it was the perfect bait to lure Lars into a false sense of security. Lady Selena, knowing full well what the scenario had in store for me, was speechless.

"I don't have a choice, do I?" I had to make Lady Yulisse fall for me if we were going to expose Lars at the ball. "It's my duty to this country to use any means necessary to quash the opponents of the throne. If I can't do this, I'm not fit to be king."

"And your true feelings?" Harold asked with a frosty glare.

"I'll use any means necessary to quash the opponents of Elizabeth and my love. I'll make him rue the day he set his sights on her."

That was my conclusion after this last week of unease. I looked back at Harold, but he didn't have a pillow ready for me. *Drat.*

Lady Selena squealed with joy and applauded me eagerly.

Good. Funnel that energy into writing Elizabeth's and my romance story. Come what may, the time for waiting is over. Now, we strike.

Chapter 5: Vincent's Struggle

I had made up my mind. No matter what Lady Yulisse said, I would accept it with a smile. I wouldn't fight her, even if she spoke against Elizabeth herself...or so I had sworn.

When I found myself standing before Lady Yulisse herself, with all her crocodile tears and irritating tics, the best I could do was reply in utter apathy.

"Of course Lady Elizabeth would be upset at me," she sighed. "Whenever I walk into a room, all eyes turn to me whether I like it or not. I'm just a poor countryside noble. I don't deserve to be treated like that. Not only that, I swear that Lord Edward, Lord Lucas, and Lord Raphael are only friends, no matter what everyone says."

"I know."

"I don't know the first thing about proper manners, though, so I'm afraid I just keep causing problems for everyone. Of course Lady Elizabeth would be upset at me. I deserve to have my dress torn and my notebooks thrown away."

"Not at all."

"You really think so? You're so kind...but I've already decided that no matter the hardships that come my way, I'll accept them readily."

"Just be yourself, Lady Yulisse."

"I'm so glad to hear you say that, Prince Vincent."

She smiled, and I forced a smile back.

Me, puppet. She smile, me smile back. Me emotion good.

I ran over Raphael's advice a few more times in my head. The key was to kill my own thoughts and opinions and agree with her, no matter what drivel she uttered. Tell her what she wanted to hear. If she looked sad, I'd make a sad face too, and if she looked happy, I'd smile at her. I was an actor playing the role of her hero. That was all.

It sounded easy enough, but doing it was another story. I couldn't call her out for implying Elizabeth was some monster, or wonder aloud just how much of her infernal small-talk revolved around how beautiful her home in the countryside was, or voice any of the other countless irritations I'd been accumulating. Elizabeth would never bully anyone, so of course Lady Yulisse had to resort to petty lies. All I had to do was pretend to believe her and lull her into a false sense of security.

"I deeply regret that you've been suffering so," I said mechanically.

She smiled at me. "Really? I honestly don't mind myself."

Seriously? You complain my ear off, but you don't mind? Amazing, that.

I kept silent, praying with all my heart that the conversation would end already.

"I didn't believe you were the real Star Maiden at first, but now I see. You're full of mysterious charm, as though you were blessed."

"Oh, no, I'm just an ordinary baron's daughter. But there is one thing..."

"Would you tell me your secret?" I whispered.

Her face flushed beet-red. "Y-Your Highness? If I told you I was blessed by the stars, would you believe me?"

"Blessed...by the stars?"

There we go! Finally, we're getting somewhere!

I feigned surprise, and although she turned away shyly, I could tell she was smirking. She knew this wasn't the time to smile, but she had to be dying to spill the source of her good luck. Lars had likely convinced her to stay quiet, but with just one more little push...

"If the very night sky has offered you its protection, you must be a true holy maiden."

I couldn't believe I was saying something so hopelessly trite, but the words came out all right. She squirmed and squeaked with embarrassment as she covered her face with her hands. My flattery had hit a soft spot.

What did Raphael say about times like this? Pull back?

If I stopped flattering her, she'd be more likely to boast. Apparently, people were quick to jump on seemingly scarce opportunities.

"Er... I'm sorry, I suppose that was too forward of me. If you'd rather not discuss it, we can change the topic," I said.

"N-No, of course not! I'd love to tell you, but...I've never told anyone about it before now."

"Are you sure you're comfortable sharing your secret with me?" I asked.

"I'd love to!"

"Thank you."

I flashed her my best princely smile, and she giggled bashfully. I could tell it was earnest—her guard had dropped, and I could see how she lusted for the throne.

This has been so easy, I almost feel guilty. If she wasn't so gullible, she never would have believed a mere novel could prophesize reality. Just as Raphael said, she's just a normal girl at heart. Sorry, Lady Yulisse, but you'll have to tell me everything if I'm to put Lars in his place and be together with Elizabeth.

I smiled warmly and encouraged her to talk with my eyes.

"You see, just before I enrolled at the Academy, I met a strange man who looked like a student," she eagerly explained. "He gave me a book and the most beautiful gemstone I've ever seen."

"That book...was it *Star Maiden*?" I prompted.

"It was! He explained that my destiny was written inside it. He also said that the gem was a gift from the very heavens and that if I prayed to it every morning, I'd be blessed. I was shocked that the book had me as the main character—but just imagine my surprise when everything in it started becoming real!"

"I see... That man must have been sent by the very heavens. By any chance, was he a lanky fellow with black eyes, and black hair that was roughly shoulder-length?" I asked, fishing for the answers I sought.

“Why, yes! How did you know?”

“That’s what the royal family’s guardian spirit looks like. It’s all coming together now...”

House Drewleid didn’t have any spirits among them, but it’d make sense they were impersonating the royal family’s ancient protector. I pretended to be lost in thought while Lady Yulisse watched and waited with glee.

From the sound of it, Lars gave her the manacite himself. I wasn’t surprised, given how valuable the gem was and how easily his whole plot could turn sideways if his go-between betrayed him. That would mean that Lady Yulisse got a good look at him, which would help explain his absence from school.

“I’d like to tell my father about you,” I finally said.

“Your father?”

“His Majesty, of course. He may ask to meet you.”

“Really?!” she cried with delight.

That was technically true. If she ever went to the palace, however, there was no telling what Mother might do to her for putting Elizabeth through such hardship. I’d have to make sure Mother was away first.

Lady Yulisse looked up at me coquettishly, tears brimming in her eyes. “Your Highness...”

A cold chill ran up my spine and my stomach churned.

Oh, why’d I have to lead her on like that?

“Ah, look at the time! I’d best get back to Harold, or else he’ll worry,” I said.

At the very mention of Harold’s name, Lady Yulisse’s heated gaze died out.

Thank you for being so frosty, Harold.

“I’m glad we had the chance to talk.”

“Me too, Prince Vincent.”

Again, it’s Your Royal Highness to you.

She rested a hand lightly on my arm, and I resisted the urge to shake her off.

Instead, I only smiled.

How shameless... Is she so certain she's won already?

"Please come to the west school building's garden next week, same time," she invited.

I resisted the urge to retch.

The west school building? Elizabeth holds her study groups there after school! What is she plotting?!

"I'll be there. I look forward to seeing you then." I nodded firmly, and she finally let go of me. After exchanging our goodbyes, she left.

I was impressed that I had lasted so long without scowling at her, but my efforts came at a price. The entire next day, my face was so sore I could barely feel it.



ONE week later, I arrived at the time and place Lady Yulisse had suggested to find her already waiting for me. The garden trees were all neatly shaped into spheres, and the fountain at the center of the square created a small rainbow with its mist. It was beautiful, but I had more important things on my mind. I made sure not to get so close to Lady Yulisse that she could lay a finger on me.

"Hello," I said.

"Good afternoon, Prince Vincent! I was sooo lonely without you!"

"Sorry, I've been busy."

Again with the names... And stop pouting!

Of course, I couldn't tell her that I didn't want anything to do with her outside of what was necessary. I'd spent the past week avoiding her like the plague. I hid behind Harold as I moved from classroom to classroom, and when I needed to stay at school past the end of the day, I called her natural enemy, Raphael, to handle her.

Even so, the mere thought that I would have to see her again made me ill. I would never approach her of my own volition, and even now my stomach was

somersaulting with unease. Despite having skipped lunch altogether, I felt something akin to heartburn. It wasn't that I was that weak-willed—rather, I knew she intended to harm Elizabeth even further. If the worst came to pass, I would be forced to prioritize her safety and ignore Elizabeth. That was the only way to follow the plot, and the thought of it made me violently ill.

“Oh? Who's that?”

At the sound of Lady Yulisse's voice, I looked to find a group of young ladies leaving the central school building. In the middle of them was Elizabeth, looking as radiant as always. Beside her, Lady Margaret was smiling and laughing. Before I could do anything, they spotted us, and her entire entourage grew tense. Elizabeth retained her relaxed smile, and she acknowledged us with a composed nod of her head.

“I'll try talking to her!” Lady Yulisse said. “I'm sure Lady Elizabeth would understand if only we try to talk this out.”

Ugh... I can't watch.

Lady Yulisse approached Elizabeth slowly but confidently. She intended to play out the scene where the heroine attempts to reason with the duke's daughter, no doubt. The duke's daughter in the story, of course, didn't listen.

Lady Yulisse picked up the corners of her dress in a curtsy and chatted with Elizabeth. I couldn't make out their conversation, and Elizabeth's entourage likely couldn't either—certainly not from the way Lady Margaret was staring daggers at them, daring them to interfere. Elizabeth didn't contribute much to the conversation, and she grew increasingly confused as Lady Yulisse carried on.

Everything changed when Elizabeth extended her hand towards Lady Yulisse. It was a slow and harmless gesture, and yet—

“Ahhh!” Lady Yulisse let out a bloodcurdling scream and threw herself backwards towards the fountain.

Everyone stared as she stumbled about. The fountain was shallow enough to pose no danger to her, and it was obvious that she stumbled on purpose. People looked at her as though she was an idiot—me included—but not a soul was concerned about her wellbeing. Until Elizabeth stepped forward.

“Look out!” she cried, reaching out to catch Lady Yulisse by the hand and stabilize her. She was unable to combat the falling fool’s momentum, and Elizabeth fell along with her.

“Elizabeth!” I shouted.

“Lady Elizabeth!” cried her entourage.

The ladies rushed forward, but they hadn’t a hope of reaching her in time. Before I could stop myself, I stretched out a hand and was already uttering an incantation.

“Gravito Windia!”

Mana pulsed throughout my body, and air compressed in front of my hand. A split-second later, it burst forward as a gale, enveloping Elizabeth and catching her just before she hit the ground. It lifted her up gently, depositing her on her feet without so much as a speck of dirt on her dress.

I let out a sigh of relief, but Elizabeth had a pained expression as she looked at her empty hand—the one with which she had reached out to Lady Yulisse.

“Oh, drat.”



SPLASHH!

Lady Yulisse fell into the fountain. I made a mistake. Because Elizabeth had caught her briefly, it disrupted her balance. Had she stumbled in, she would have only gotten wet up to her waist at worst, but now she was drenched from head to toe.

Great... And after I'd told myself time and time again to save Lady Yulisse. Oh, and Lady Margaret, you don't have to seem quite so pleased with this. Harold would chew you out if he were here.

As I let out a heavy sigh, Elizabeth hurried to the edge of the fountain and extended a hand to help Lady Yulisse.

"Are you all right, Lady Yulisse?!" I called out a moment later, realizing I had best say something. Given the realism of her performance, I had no trouble sounding sincere.

Elizabeth got hold of Lady Yulisse and helped pull her out, dirtying her own dress in the process. Lady Yulisse looked at her blankly, as if not understanding what was happening, but at the sound of my voice she began to grin.

Fortunately, she was a lower noble, and one raised as a commoner. She had no real understanding of magic, and failed to understand what had really transpired. Instead, she seemed to conclude that her farce had succeeded, and that I was coming to "save" her from Elizabeth.

Thank goodness.

"Thank you for saving me, Your Highness! I was so, so scared!" she cooed.

"I'm sorry...this was all my fault."

"No... No, not at all!"

She sniffled as she threw her sopping body at me, and I resisted the urge to step aside and let her hit the ground face-first. Lady Margaret and the other bodyguards shot me murderous looks, disappointed that I had chosen poorly this time.

Don't worry, Lady Yulisse. I'm terrified, too.

“Allow me to help you clean up. I’ll call Harold right away.” I looked up at Elizabeth’s entourage. “You were headed to the west building, weren’t you? You may go on ahead.”

Just stop glaring. Please.

Elizabeth considered my words a moment before nodding and agreeing. The bodyguards muttered darkly to one another as they left. It was like watching a pack of wolves herding a sheep.

After they were out of sight, the tension in my shoulders drained, but my expression remained locked in a strained frown.

“Please, Your Highness,” Lady Yulisse whispered, “you need not get angry for me. I don’t mind.”

I gave her a gentle smile.

There’s no way in hell I’d feel anything for you, ever.

My concern was that even though I claimed I’d call Harold, Elizabeth willingly left me alone with Lady Yulisse. My own fiancée, of all people, gave me *carte blanche* to *care* for another woman. She didn’t appear jealous, even, as if trusting there was nothing more between us. In the novel, the villainess scolds the heroine and the prince both. Lady Yulisse seemed ignorant of what that implied, but it was clear that Elizabeth thought nothing of her.

Worse, Elizabeth thinks nothing of me.

Even though the end of the *Star Maiden* conspiracy was now on the horizon, my own troubles showed no sign of ending.



AFTER procuring a change of clothes for Lady Yulisse and seeing her home, I retreated into my room, drew the curtains so it was pitch black, and pulled out the glass rabbit with a heavy sigh.

Elizabeth was only trying to avoid getting further involved with Lady Yulisse. She was right to limit their interactions—that was why she left me to handle Lady Yulisse. She trusted me, that was clear.

But why wasn’t she at least a little jealous?!

“Oh, drat, drat, drat!”

I rolled and flailed about on my bed. I was glad I couldn't see the portrait of Elizabeth on the far wall. If I were to look at her saintly smile, I would feel forgiven for my actions. This was one time I wished she *wouldn't* absolve my sins so easily.

“B-But we have matching glass rabbits... Yes, the rabbits! Aha, I *knew* it! She loves me! She really loves me!”

...Now I just feel empty inside.

Harold and Raphael always poked fun at me, but now that I thought about it, having such strong one-sided feelings for her for half my life had to be ruining my self-esteem. I was still a child at heart, parading about in a prince's skin. Even if my heart shone brighter than the sun with love, night would always fall in the end.

No... Negativity won't help me in the slightest. I need to resolve this mess—not only will Elizabeth thank me, but I'll finally be able to stay by her side in school as I should. Are we engaged or aren't we?!

“All right,” I said as I rolled off my bed and onto my feet. I brought the light back into the room and looked up at Elizabeth, where she hung on my wall. “Liza... I swear I'll become a man of whom you can be—”

Knock, knock.

“Your Royal Highness. There's been an urgent development.”

“—P-Proud?!”

Oh, drat. That was awkward, wasn't it? “Proud?” What kind of a reply is that?

Harold didn't say anything through the door, continuing in a serious tone. “Lord Dominic has found a lead.”

“I'll be right there.”

I straightened my back and glanced in the mirror to ensure I looked composed enough. The glass rabbit was still clenched in my fist.



WHEN I arrived at the parlor reserved for our secret meeting, Marquis Dominic was already waiting for me. He politely bowed, his muscles straining against his thin robes. Before he even completed his bow, he cut straight to business.

“I’ll be frank. I’ve found the mage responsible for incanting the Charm, and in all likelihood, he engraved it as well. He disappeared soon after misappropriating his workshop. However, I have located where both he and his sister are now—under house arrest at the Drewleid mansion. I believe he was blackmailed into aiding them.”

“Excellent work. If we can free them, they’ll be irrefutable evidence of House Drewleid’s crimes.” It wasn’t unusual for a duke to have a mage or two around—but if the man was locked in the mansion with his sister, it was a different story. “I’ll ask Father to lighten his punishment in exchange for his testimony against House Drewleid. They’ll likely be under surveillance for the rest of their lives, of course...”

Lord Dominic nodded. “As may be necessary.”

“You’re sure they’re both alive?” I asked.

He nodded again. “Positive. One of my contacts inside the mansion confirmed it. They have a servant who takes the siblings their meals. It seems House Drewleid lacked the resolve to silence them.”

“Or they could be insurance.”

If the manacite’s existence got out, they could threaten to kill the sister and force the mage to blame House Norden. Between such a damning testimony and the purchase records in his name, Count Zachary would be unable to prove his innocence. The mage and his sister were still of use to House Drewleid.

“Lady Yulisse told me a man matching Lars’ description gave her the manacite,” I added. “I believe that she trusts me and that she was telling the truth, but I’m unsure if her story would be the same were she to testify before Father.”

Lord Dominic remained silent, and he didn’t look convinced. Even if Lady Yulisse were to hear that the whole incident was staged, would she confess

everything so frankly? Lars' supposed illness would only make her story less believable.

What now...?

"All right, I've decided," I said. "Send the troops to House Drewleid. Have them rescue the mage and his sister, and force Lars to come clean about everything."

Harold gave me a blank stare. "On what authority? You lack solid grounds to do so, not to mention that you have no soldiers under your command. You'll have to wait until you're king to abuse your military." His tone was almost mocking, as though he were telling a young child to save up his allowance to buy the toy he wanted.

"I know that. I was joking."

He raised an eyebrow. "I hadn't noticed. My apologies for being so humorless."

He's not even trying to deny it this time...

I cleared my throat, attempting to return a more serious tone to the conversation. "Well, even if we did arrest Lady Yulisse or Lars now, it would likely only make *Star Maiden's* fans more interested."

Even if Raphael and the others were limiting the influence of Lady Yulisse's Charm, she was still the center of attention at the Academy. If she were to be apprehended—or even if Lars were arrested for his connections to the story, despite being seemingly unrelated—the rumors would spread like wildfire no matter what the official story was.

"Besides, I'd rather keep the Charm manacite's existence secret," I said.

Lord Dominic nodded in agreement. "It's far too dangerous not to."

Taboos and curses, especially a top-ranking one like Charm, needed to stay as anecdotes in the textbooks. The less real they seemed, the safer everyone would be. Officially, Lars' crime would be attempted treason by means of manipulating Lady Yulisse. I'd drag him out of hiding and ground them both squarely in reality. The Coming-of-Age Ball would be the end of this whole

farce.

“Lars has put so much effort into this little story—it’s only fitting that he witnesses its end.”

My lips spread into a grin that would rival even the most notorious of villains, and I fixed Harold and Lord Dominic with a determined look. They both dipped their heads, submitting to my plans.

Never again will I let him harm Elizabeth... Never.



THE Coming-of-Age Ball would allow me to awaken all the students caught in their dreams, break Lady Yulisse’s resolve, and force Lars to expose himself. To that end, Harold and I visited Father as soon as Lord Dominic left. I had to report our findings to him as well as obtain permission for appropriating the Ball.

After I explained my plan, Father smiled.

“Very well! We believe the younger generation requires sobering up from time to time.”

“Thank you, Father.”

“But are you certain your plan won’t offend Elizabeth?” His face was fraught with worry to an almost false extent.

He knows the answer, doesn’t he?

I shook my head politely. “Elizabeth wouldn’t bat an eye if I were to cause a fuss with another woman. If anything, she’ll be upset at herself for her role in jeopardizing our nation’s future.”

“Is that so?”

“Rather, if she *did* feel jealous...”

I cut myself off before I could incriminate myself further, but Father had heard enough to smirk nonetheless.

I knew it. He’s toying with me, the old codger.

Elizabeth always put the needs of the kingdom before herself. Once she

learned that my deception would be for the good of the whole country, she'd forgive me without a second thought. If anything, I was more likely to walk away with scars.

"Ah, sweet youth! How dearly We've missed it!" He chuckled as he stroked his snow-white beard. "Since you're so convinced of Lars' guilt, We might well send the troops to House Drewleid now!"

"..."

Uh... No comment.

The last thing I expected was to take after Father at a time like this. I glanced back at Harold, expecting him to say something sarcastic or at least roll his eyes, but he seemed unaffected. Serious, even.

Father's joy rapidly faded as he realized nobody was going to say anything.

"We were joking."

"I know, Father."

He couldn't have known I'd told the exact same joke not long before. Assuming we didn't get his humor, he sighed boredly and stood up.

"If you're done, We would like to sleep now. Ah, and don't tell your mother. She may send the troops in earnest."

"Don't worry, I know."

Things had been strange between my parents for a while, but rather than question him now, I bid him good night and locked my worries deep inside.



JUST one more month... Then this whole mess will be over.

The days trickled by like molasses. I met with Lady Yulisse once a week to allay any suspicions she may have, and we talked more than once, but I had given up on meeting Elizabeth after school and headed straight home most days.

At some point I stopped seeing Lucas and Edward around Lady Yulisse, leaving only Raphael buzzing about her like a bee to a flower. Without anyone to shield her from his onslaught, Lady Yulisse looked desperately seasick most of the

time. Even though she was reaping what she'd sown, I felt a tad sympathetic towards her.

Didn't those two like her, though? And why is Raphael dogging her like this?

As I pondered their relationship on my way to the carriage with Harold, a voice rang out from behind me.

"Your Royal Highness!"

I recognized that firm tone even without turning to see the speaker. I stopped to find Edward walking towards me with long, brisk strides. His face was flushed, despite not seeming out of breath, and he shot me a cold look as he approached.

"What's the matter, Edward?"

He pursed his lips and balled his fists. Then he dipped into a ninety-degree bow.

"Wh-What?" I retreated a step.

"I beg of you!" he shouted. "Allow me to go out with Lady Yulisse!"

Ah, so that's it. Come to incite his "romantic rival," has he?

"I am aware that, as the Star Maiden, she is destined to be with you. I've no reason to be at her side, and as such, I've taken my due distance."

"Did Lady Yulisse tell you to, by chance?"

"Yes. She said that she's of one heart and soul with you, and that she's unable to requite my love. She's such a kind, considerate soul for telling us... Though, as you can see, Raphael is still attempting to resist."

"Oh, is that so?"

That explained her sudden change in company. I doubted either he or Lucas realized how much trouble Raphael was giving her now.

"Did Lucas agree to this?"

He shook his head. "In the beginning, Lucas and I attempted to make the depth of our love for her known. However, we realized that we were only holding her back, so we gave up. Our read-alongs of *Star Maiden* helped us

better understand our proper roles.”

The thought of Lucas and Edward poring over the romance novel together was a tad strange, to say the least.

I suppose he's a fan, through and through. He takes after his father.

I toyed with the idea of introducing him to Lady Selena, but decided against it. He'd smother the poor introvert to death out of sheer enthusiasm.

“Thank you for coming to me with this,” I replied calmly. “However, as prince, I can hardly approach her in public.”

“Of course.” His face drooped solemnly.

“However, I have received my father's permission to make the Coming-of-Age Ball somewhat...memorable.”

Excitement bounced back onto his features. “Oh, Your Royal Highness!”

“Until then, I'll need you and Lucas to watch over and protect Lady Yulisse. I'm aware that this is a lot to ask, but are you willing?”

After all, the fewer people that get Charmed, the better.

His face blushed rose-pink, and he clapped a hand over his heart as though I'd ordered him to protect my own wife with his life.

“Of course! I swear, no harm shall befall her!”

Good... This way, Lady Yulisse should hear of the Coming-of-Age Ball and expect the climax to go off as written. Please let this news reach Lars' ears, too...



THAT weekend, as I absorbed the latest installment of Elizabeth and my love story, word came that Lars would be attending school for the next week leading up to the Ball. Not only did word reach him, but he took the bait hook, line, and sinker. I even knew why he was attending school early—he wanted to attend the same school as Elizabeth for as long as possible. One week could be written off as a coincidence and wouldn't draw unnecessary suspicion. I had virtually no contact with Lars outside of when he accompanied his parents on business to the palace, but if he truly loved Elizabeth, then I could predict his movements

with some accuracy.

As it happened, I received an indignant letter from Raphael on that same day, which read: *“You told Edward to go back to Yulie, didn’t you? Oh, I hate you! I was finally getting somewhere with her!”*

Harold tore it up and threw it into the fireplace as soon as he finished reading it aloud, but I was left with one burning question.

Where, exactly, does he think he was “getting” with her?

Chapter 6: Climax in the Ballroom

FINALLY, the day had come. The Royal Academy's Coming-of-Age Ball was held near the end of the first year to celebrate the freshmen turning sixteen. In an effort to keep it from ballooning out of proportion, no families were allowed to attend, but every student was expected to participate. It followed only the Commencement and Graduation Balls in opulence. This particular year, there was another compelling draw—the opportunity to witness *Star Maiden's* dramatic climax firsthand, the scene in which the crown prince spurned his cruel fiancée in favor of the heroine.

After dressing in a manner befitting my status, I arrived at the ball precisely on time. The floors were polished marble, in which one could easily see the reflection of the chandeliers above. Every lordling and lady in attendance was dressed in their finest, with excitement dancing about their features. Normally such a display would be unfit for polite company, but the sheer anticipation of what was to come overwhelmed them.

As soon as I called Lady Yulisse and Elizabeth's names, the crowd parted, leaving me alone in the center of the room. The circle of onlookers watched eagerly as Lady Yulisse took her place by my side, and Elizabeth stood opposite of us. I glanced around the crowd before repressing a heavy sigh.

Lucas seemed to be of two minds as he stared at us, nostrils flaring, and Edward seemed beside himself with glee—but I'd expected as much. What caught my attention was how pleased most of the students appeared to be. Even those who had seemed so indifferent before must have been affected by the Charm, after all—or perhaps they were that curious as to how this would pan out. Towards the back of the crowd, I caught a glimpse of Lars, chatting with his friends in feigned surprise as he looked on.

I'll put that act of yours to an end.

Elizabeth seemed almost perfectly composed. She was confused to see Lady

Yulisse at my side, but not angry in the slightest. I tried to look as cool and indifferent as possible, but my heart was pounding so hard I feared it might break.

No, Elizabeth! It's not what it looks like! I told Lady Yulisse to come stand beside me, yes, but she's the one who linked arms with me! I don't want to, I swear!

Regardless of my unease, there was a scene to play out. I took a deep breath and tightened my gut. Then, I released the very words the onlookers wished to hear.

"I won't tolerate your selfish misdeeds a minute longer! Elizabeth la Montlivere, consider our engagement broken!"

I said it... I didn't even stammer!

The words mollified me too deeply to practice them, but it panned out fine. I glanced at Elizabeth's face for only a moment. She wasn't angry—or even upset at all, for that matter. Her expression remained as masklike as before.

"I'm not sure I understand," she said.

"How could you not? You know full well what you've done to poor Lady Yulisse."

"I haven't done a thing."

I know that.

Oddly enough, her replies matched the flow of the scenario to a T. The room was perfectly silent. She fidgeted for a moment before meeting my eyes.

Come now, Elizabeth. Say the words I've been waiting for.

"I'm afraid I'm in no position to accept that. Without both His Majesty and my father's consent—"

Just as I'd hoped, she raised Father's name. Given her devotion to the kingdom and the Crown, I had expected as much.

"I have it," I cut her off. "Father gave me explicit permission to announce it here."

Her expression froze, her opalescent eyes growing large. She trembled as though she might collapse.

I owe her an apology after this—a BIG one. I'll bow so deeply my face will be underground.

Elizabeth's gaze shifted to Lady Yulisse and changed again. Her cheeks flushed, and her eyes were burning with rage. Never before had I seen her so genuinely angry. She tightened her lips into a thin line, but her brows remained as artfully arched as always. The burning depths of her eyes were the only indication of her fury—a lofty, prideful sort of wrath. It was all too clear what Lady Yulisse was doing to provoke such a reaction.

"Freeze like the image in a mirror!" I incanted, releasing the mana I'd been accumulating as we talked.

The spell quickly overtook the entire ballroom, freezing everyone dead in their tracks except for Elizabeth and myself, on account of our Wards. Elizabeth's legs appeared to be giving out beneath her, so I rushed to her side and caught her at the last moment.

"Sorry for putting you through that, Liza," I muttered.

"Prince Vince..."

Hearing my pet name for her put her at ease. The anger in her eyes dwindled, then died out completely. She rested in my arms for a moment, but as soon as she realized the position she was in, she pulled herself free. I kept a hold of her hand, which she graciously allowed. I had to make it intimately apparent to everyone in attendance that I had no intention of letting her go—especially to Lars, as his face was frozen in the euphoric bliss of victory.

"My apologies, Your Royal Highness. Thank you."

"I'll return you all to normal in a moment. But first, consider your expressions."

As I recited the lines I'd prepared, I ran over the plot in my head—not that of *Star Maiden*, but my own. The public regarded me as the pinnacle of princely virtue, but I was a far cry from that. At my core, I was every bit as childish and defiant as I had been before my first meeting with Elizabeth. I simply wore the

guise of Elizabeth's perfect fiancé—and in that respect, *Star Maiden's* prince and his efforts to better himself felt all too real. At heart, I was no different from the storybook hero in how he cast aside everything for the one he loved. If anyone or anything were to *dare* stand between us and our true loves, then Hell itself would be a pleasant alternative to our wrath.

I cast a dark look at Lady Yulisse, taking full stock of her true emotions. Her eyes shone with impish glee, and her lips curled into a sneer. There was only one villainess in this tale, and it was by no means Elizabeth—no student in the room would be deceived again after such an unsightly display.

I slowly scanned the room, studying each expression one by one, my eyes full of silent judgment. Just as royalty had its burdens, the nobility had their own duties to fulfill. Elizabeth had taught me well, with her impeccable sense of composure and humble sense of duty. She righted my own crooked disposition. I would have every student corrected by that same inexplicable force.

"The truest measure of nobility is keeping one's emotions hidden. Those of you who turned a blind eye to these troubles are truly deserving of your titles. But the rest of you—especially you in the front—you've confused fiction for reality. You are slow-witted at best and ignorant of the harm you cause others at worst. Consider yourselves fortunate that your parents aren't in attendance; else you would receive the scolding of your lives. I sincerely hope you will reflect on this whole affair."

With a snap of my fingers, I released everyone in attendance from my spell. The onlookers exchanged humbled glances with each other. Others seemed mollified at Elizabeth's dedication to the country, despite their treatment of her. Chatter hummed about the room.

"Lady Elizabeth is right... This wouldn't serve the country in the slightest."

"What in the world was I thinking? How humiliating."

"How could I let a book lead me on? What would Father think of me now...?"

"Lady Yulisse was just after the throne this whole time..."

Edward was one of the first to move, disappearing from the front lines to seek refuge in the crowd. With any luck, he would learn from his errors and become

a worthy Count Norden—though I had to admit his gullibility was still worrying.

Just as Lord Dominic had suggested, the story had been drawing out Charm's potential to its fullest. But now that Lady Yulisse was unmasked as the shallow traitor she truly was, her Blessing was at its weakest. It was as though the entire Academy had awakened from a dream, and the haze of fanaticism that had permeated its halls was now naught but a memory. *Star Maiden* was reduced to its rightful place as a fairy tale, a faithless mockery of reality, and the curtains closed on it for the last time.

In the midst of it all, Lady Yulisse shook her head in desperation and wept. "Why...?! So this was all pointless?! What was it all for?!"

Elizabeth took pity on the poor wretch and stopped me from pushing her any further while I called Harold to have Lady Yulisse taken away. Though her will was broken, the Blessing still lingered strongly about her—she'd have to spend several days alone in a chamber in the palace. Before that, she would most likely be taken before Father, which was in and of itself a far more terrifying proposition.

Now, on to the next order of business.

I turned to face Elizabeth, giving her my warmest smile. "Liza. As an apology for this whole ordeal, allow me to gift you anything you desire. Anything at all."

"O-Oh, no, I couldn't possibly accept! If anything, I should apologize to you for handling this affair so ineptly. You've taught me what it is I lack."

Her smile was crisp and polite, but there was deep respect in her eyes, as though this entire miserable ordeal was her fault.

She still isn't jealous, is she?

I straightened my back, and she dipped her head to me in a curtsy, one every bit as graceful as the first time we met, her hand nearly leaving mine in the process. As if possessed, I caught her hand and planted a soft kiss on the back of it. She was startled, but she smiled nonetheless, her cheeks blushing faintly.

She must be an angel... Even though she looks plenty baffled, there's no other way to describe her.

The best part was that acting so noxiously loving in front of this crowd was bound to lure out a man who, like myself, never knew when to give up. I was about to take a step closer to Elizabeth to egg him on when a voice rang out from the crowd.

“Cease your foul philandering at once, Vincent!!”

A single man stepped out from the crowd—Lars. His short form was clad in a tailored suit, and his hard-soled shoes clacked angrily as he strode into the middle of the room. His brow was knitted in outrage, his face beet-red.

Me, a philanderer? That’s rich.

Elizabeth looked at him in shock, and he returned a hard glare. She paled slightly.

Oh, so he’s the type to abuse the girl he likes in an insecure plea for attention? How utterly foul.

Without skipping a beat, he whipped his head towards me, disrespect filling his eyes.

“How dare you act so brazenly in front of all these people?!” he snarled.

“Elizabeth is my fiancée. I’ve done nothing out of sorts.” I kept my voice as emotionless as possible, my face betraying nothing.

“Hah!” Lars snorted. “You’re no longer engaged—you broke it off! We all heard you! Don’t tell us you *lied* with His Majesty’s own name!” His conceit was palpable. “Contradict yourself however you please; you can’t re-engage yourself so easily! Or what? Are you willing to make good on what you said about banishing yourself? That’s your only option, isn’t it, now that you’ve dragged Lady Elizabeth’s name through the mud!”

“Hm?” I blinked at him, dumbfounded.

“What are you talking about?” Elizabeth asked him earnestly.

“Oh, enough playing dumb! She’s bound to be expelled from the Academy at least for bullying a poor baron’s daughter. The whole school can testify to her misdeeds!” he ranted.

“Hmmm?” I cast a sidelong glance at Elizabeth, who seemed as baffled as I

did. The students watching us were no doubt equally lost.

Oblivious to our confusion, Lars narrowed his eyes as he continued, “First, she spread those spiteful rumors. Then she forced the mindless cronies she calls friends to join in. And she even went so far as to tear up the poor girl’s books! What was it she did just the other day? She pushed poor Lady Yulisse into the fountain! Any prince *stupid* enough to marry a witch like that would run this fair nation straight into the ground!”

The more he talked, the deeper he dug his own grave, until every last soul at the ball was staring daggers at him—and still, he failed to notice a thing.



Are you seriously still talking about Star Maiden, Lars? Now? Though I suppose your simple-mindedness is going to make my job a lot easier.

The plan had been to feed him favorable reports by way of Lady Yulisse, but I hadn't expected him to swallow it all so unflinchingly.

"Um... I know I risk repeating myself, but I didn't do any of that," Elizabeth said haltingly.

"Exactly," I nodded, turning to the crowd. "Has anyone witnessed any of these allegations? Any wrongdoing on Elizabeth's part at all?"

Nobody stepped forward. From the looks on their faces, they were surprised by such allegations. Raphael and the other would-be suitors had prevented any of the ill-natured rumors from gaining traction from Lady Yulisse's lips, to the point where she was forced to stage that confession to me.

Lars blinked a few times as he took stock of the situation. Within seconds, steadily growing terror eroded his confidence. "Y-You've got to be joking," he stammered through his thin, pale lips.

"As you can see, there isn't a speck of evidence to suggest Elizabeth bullied Lady Yulisse." I smiled. "However, there are plenty of witnesses who watched Lady Yulisse throw herself into a fountain like a fool and who saw her act indecently clingy around me. In fact, all the evidence points to the grudge being aimed in the opposite direction."

I pulled Elizabeth's hand behind my back, giving it a light squeeze. She was acting strong, but I knew confronting Lars had to be taxing.

Lars didn't reply. His eyes darted uneasily about the room like a hare surrounded by hunting dogs. A hundred pathetic excuses died on his lips before he said them. Finally, he worked up the resolve to do something—but unable to cuss either of us out again, he instead whipped his head about to glare into the crowd.

"*HAVEN!!* You worthless, braindead cow! Who gave you the right to side with Vincent?!"

"Eek?!" came Lady Selena's whimper from the far corner of the ballroom. A

moment later, someone clamored out the door and into the hall.

Ah... So, she helped us deceive Lars. She must have sent him reports of Elizabeth's bullying, mustering her artistic talents in the process. That must be why he was so willing to believe our engagement had truly been broken off.

"You're all wretched pigs!" Lars raged, practically frothing at the mouth. "Do you know who I am?!"

"It was your fault for blindly believing everything you heard," I replied firmly. "The moment you accepted Lady Yulisse's reports of having captured my heart, the ending had already been written."

"Damn... That airheaded simpleton swore that everything was going according to the story!"

As soon as the words escaped his lips, he realized his blunder, but it was too late.

It was my turn to smirk. "So you were the one pulling the strings after all."

"N-No... I was only...!"

"You've held a grudge ever since Elizabeth cut off her engagement to you, haven't you? That's why you've attempted to defame me."

"Shut up! You're wrong!!"

He couldn't explain himself, especially not how his unrequited love had twisted into a childish grudge. He glared at Elizabeth. She bravely met his gaze, but then paled and dropped her eyes to the floor.

That was a look of politeness, Lars, make no mistake. Should you try to confess your love to her now, you'll know only suffering.

He seemed to realize that and gritted his teeth in frustration, keeping his true motive bottled up inside. Our spectators, unable to parse the subtext that lay behind the exchange, were still dumbfounded that he was the mastermind. Silence descended upon the ballroom.

After a long moment, Lars broke the peace, his gaze rising to meet mine with a faint grin. "You did break off your engagement, didn't you?"

His eyes were ripe with expectation, outright glee at what he believed would come. I let out an inward sigh.

If he knew how fond Father and Mother are of Elizabeth, he wouldn't be half as gleeful.

"I haven't," I replied firmly. "You see, Father gave me permission to *announce* that our engagement was over for the purposes of this farce. Nothing more."

Lars gaped at me, mortified.

"We can discuss the rest in the palace, together with Lady Yulisse," I continued.

There, his fate will be decided.

His face burst into rage once again, brows raised to the heavens as he bared his teeth like a wild animal. "Burn in Hell, Vincent! I treated you like a brother, and this is how you thank me?!"

His pride and reputation forgotten, he charged at me, stumbling over his own feet in his blind rage. Raw bloodlust burned in his eyes. Several noblewomen in attendance let out cries of horror.

After I stepped in front of Elizabeth to shield her with my body, I gave her hand another reassuring squeeze. My eyes snapped back to the beast in front of me.

"I've been meaning to mention this for a while now, Lars: you're a mere duke's son, and I'm the crown prince. You'd best—"

"Show His Royal Highness some respect," finished the figure that cut in between us.

With a *thwack*, Lars' body was sent flying backwards in a neat arc before crumpling to the marble floor with a heavy thud. The interloper—Harold—cast him a cold look, ready to strike him down again should he stand.

"Ugggh..." Lars moaned.

"Rest assured, I used the flat of my blade."

What blade? You slapped him.

Since Lars was still conscious, Harold must not have hit him at full force. He appeared uninjured despite his spectacular fall. Even if he tried to assault me, he was still nobility, and it wouldn't do to hurt him in such a manner. If Harold had wanted to silence Lars for good, he could've easily done so.

You're trying to get into Lady Margaret's good graces, aren't you? I suppose I can forgive you—after all, I was trying to look good for Elizabeth.

Harold strode over to Lars and crouched to his level. "Your hand, milord?"

"G-Geh!" Lars scuttled away from Harold in fear and stood on his own, but Harold grabbed and held him by the wrist for good measure. There was a chance he might resist again—but from his stunned expression as he stared blankly at the floor, one good slap was enough to sober him.

In the end, Lars' most critical error was putting effort in all the wrong places. When he realized he was unfit for Elizabeth, he didn't try to better himself to be worthy of her. Instead, he resolved to drag her down to his level. A slap was too light a punishment.

The spectators let out a collective sigh of relief. Idle chatter resumed. The novel's storyline had been thwarted, I had protected Elizabeth's honor, and everyone knew how lovey-dovey we truly were. Lady Yulisse and Lars would leave the stage here, and the spell Charm had placed over the Academy's halls would fade away without truly making itself known. Case closed, in a sense.

Just as I was about to relax, Elizabeth strode out from behind me.

"Lord Lars?"

His head snapped up. Her hand still in mine, she levelly met his gaze, his own wrist still bound by Harold. This was likely the first time they'd spoken frankly since their engagement was broken.

"I've always felt sorry about what happened all those years ago, but that ends today. Let me put this to rest once and for all."

"Eliza—"

"I'm sorry."

Even as she apologized, her head remained high and proud. Lars flushed so

deeply that it hid the red mark left on his cheek from the slap.

He must only be feeling the true force of Harold's slap now. Yes, that must be it.

She stared into his eyes without wavering, despite the whirlwind of emotions that must have been churning in her chest. Neither lord nor lady moved a muscle—no, Lars had doubtless forgotten how to.

“Take him away,” I commanded.

“As you will.”

With that, Harold dragged away the soulless husk that had been Lars mere seconds before. Elizabeth, realizing the impact her words had on him, watched him leave with a twinge of pity—like an angel witnessing a demon get his just deserts.



AFTER Lars and Lady Yulisse had been taken away, the Coming-of-Age Ball resumed as if nothing had ever happened. I left the party a tad early to return to the palace. The issue was resolved as far as the Royal Academy was concerned, but the true final confrontation had yet to unfold. The Charm manacite was still at large, and the mage and his sister were still captives at the Drewleid mansion. Both issues had to be dealt with as quickly as possible—or so I assumed.

When I arrived in Father's throne room, Duke Drewleid was lying on the ground in shackles with his son beside him. There was a large, square cage set up for Lady Yulisse, with one of her legs shackled to the iron bars. They were being treated as the traitors they were. All three of them trembled with fear, and yet I could tell from the looks in their eyes that their wills were unbroken.

“You took your time,” Father drawled. “We were waiting.”

“Father? Is that what I think it is?”

He nodded. “The manacite is here, as are the mage and his sister.”

Marquis Dominic was holding a box with an antimagic sigil branded on it, the opalescent gleam of the manacite only faintly visible over the rim. Just behind

him were a man and a woman in robes, their faces similar enough to be relatives. It was all a little too neatly resolved for me to believe it. I looked back at Father in surprise.

He formed a wrinkly smile from behind his bushy beard. "We received word you had played your part well, so We dispatched Our men."

"You weren't joking, then?" I asked.

"One must strike whilst the iron is hot. We had letters of arrest drafted beforehand on the grounds of kidnapping and tampering with evidence, and a high chance they would evade arrest. It seemed sufficiently urgent."

"But wouldn't it cause a stir if news got out?"

"We sent only a few of Our most trusted men. Even if they were witnessed, they would appear to be naught more than messengers. Count Norden handled it well!"

He gave me a smug thumbs-up.

I know he's my father, but...doesn't this seem a little underhanded? Eugh.

"We have already finished Our investigations," he continued. "You were right on all accounts. And yet, they keep deflecting—"

"Lars forced me to!" Duke Drewleid interrupted. "Release me, and I'll have this bastard child flogged!"

"How could you, Father?! You stole the manacite! You kidnapped that poor mage! If anything, *you* forced *me* to act!"

"I-I don't know anything!" Lady Yulisse pleaded. "They tricked me! Please, Your Majesty, have mercy on me!"

Father sighed and shook his head. "What fools... Listen well! We will now announce your sentences! You all will be put under indefinite house arrest. While there were no casualties from your crimes, you commissioned and utilized a top-class forbidden Blessing. Consider yourselves blessed you have been spared the noose."

"But Your Majesty!" the former Duke protested.

“House Drewleid will be demoted to the title of Count henceforth, and the present duke’s brother shall become the new family head. Half of House Drewleid’s lands and holdings will be absorbed by the Crown. We grant you the right to choose which half you shall surrender, such that your heirlooms and longest-held lands may stay with your House. This, too, is a mercy.”

“C-Count?!” Lars sputtered.

“Me, a mere *count*?!” his father gaped.

Both were too shocked to understand a word past that. They placed immense weight on their birthright. Even the cherished possessions of their forebears were worthless in comparison.

Father furrowed his brow and slammed a fist on his throne’s armrest. “Fools! Did you not hear me say your *brother* would be Count? Both of you are stripped of your nobility in its entirety.”

“S-Stripped...?!”

“Impossible!” Lars’ father sputtered. “We carry your own grandfather’s blood! In essence, we’re royals ourselves!”

Father raised an eyebrow. “Do We hear complaining?”

Their mouths snapped shut.

“You have both irritated Us to no end... Lars.”

Lars flinched. While he was attempting to appear defiant, he was too terrified to even meet Father’s gaze.

“We have heard you purchased a house,” Father started austerely.

Lars went pale. “Wh-What?”

“Following Lady Elizabeth’s expulsion from the Royal Academy, you were planning on living with her there as her husband—were you not?”

He what?!

Lars struggled not to protest, but that only deepened his apparent guilt. Father’s gaze was stern, and the anger was slowly building to a climax inside of him. Gone was the comical old man I knew him to be—the sheer fury in his eyes

was unlike anything I'd ever witnessed. He knew his accusations were true.

"Tell Us, Lars— Did you think you could steal Lady Elizabeth from Us and the Queen? Did you truly?"

Um... Could you at least pretend to care about my feelings in all of this?

Lars, on the brink of his second public humiliation, was bright red and trembling so intensely that he seemed ready to explode. First, he was rejected by Elizabeth for being a petty creep in front of the whole school, and now even his twisted honeymoon plans were laid bare—I *almost* felt sorry for him.

Father only smiled. "Why don't you live there with your father? You have enough furniture for two, and you went to great lengths to select servants to attend to you there. It would be a pity for the fruits of your break from school to be wasted, would it not?"

Lars opened and closed his mouth like a fish out of water. Even his father was stupefied by the idea.

Deeming them both unable to defy him again, Father turned his attention to Lady Yulisse.

"Please believe me, Your Majesty!" she begged. "All I did was follow Lord Lars' orders! I had no idea what he'd do to me if I refused him...!"

Fake tears spilled down her face, a testament to the boundless faith she had in her Blessing. Lars shot her a dark look, but Father paid him no mind.

Was literally being put in a cage and shackled not enough of a clue?

"Every act of vile bullying you committed against Lady Elizabeth was at Lars' coercion, then?" Father asked. "You had no choice, did you?"

"Precisely, Your Majesty."

"You know nothing of high society, We suppose—no wonder you would be fooled by such bald-faced lies."

As he spoke, malice built in the air. Lady Yulisse naively believed that she was saved. She stopped crying on the spot and looked up at the throne in blissful anticipation.

She has the blind optimism of a real heroine... Maybe I could learn from that?

"In truth, there is one individual who would still accept you in spite of your sins," Father continued. "His house has expressed an interest in teaching you proper manners."

Wait... Don't tell me.

"Really?!" Lady Yulisse's eyes sparkled with hope.

"The offer comes from within Marquis Marshall's House. Do you accept?"

I knew it.

"A marquis?! Of course I accept!"

I did a double-take. Even Lord Dominic seemed baffled by this turn of events, and he shot me a curious look. The mage siblings behind him squirmed awkwardly.

If Lord Dominic, the head of House Marshall, doesn't know about it, then there can be only one man responsible.

"I knew you'd pick me, Yulie, my sweet!" an all-too-familiar voice trilled. "Why, we'll have no end of *fun* together!"

Raphael popped out from behind Lord Dominic's massive figure.

Lady Yulisse screamed, her pretty-girl act forgotten. "Ah?! You! Er...Lord Raphael?!"

Raphael chuckled, lips splitting into a licentious grin as he narrowed his eyes at her. "Of course. I'm Raphael Feith Marshall, as I told you when we first met. What, don't you remember? Or were you too focused on Prince Vincent to pay me any mind?"

"B-But..." Lady Yulisse's eyes swam about the room, desperate for some way out.

"Oh, no take-backsies! You wouldn't lie to His Majesty, would you?"

At his words, she collapsed to the floor of her cell, staring at the ceiling as if she were a broken puppet.

Um...Raphael? Just what have you been up to for her to react like this?

The purple-haired playboy was too busy rubbing his hands together with glee to notice me. Lord Dominic appeared to be grappling with the biggest headache of his life at his son's proclivities. Raphael must have decided that it would be too much trouble keeping up his good-boy act with Lady Yulisse so close at hand.

Still, Raphael, don't you think you're overdoing it?

"Oh, and I cleared everything with Baron Merrifield already," Raphael added cheerily. "Why, once he heard what you'd been up to, he wanted you thrown into the dungeons!"

"The dungeons, eh?" Father mused somberly. "There's nothing but filthy criminals down there, not to mention the rats and slugs... Should she prefer a cell down there, We can ready one for her."

She paled at his words, so with that, Lady Yulisse's fate was sealed, and all three of the criminals received their sentences. Raphael used magic to lift Lady Yulisse's entire cage to carry her home. As he passed by me, he was looking at her as he might a cute little guinea pig.

Epilogue: Happily Ever After... Right?

A full month had passed since the ball, and the academy seemed to forget about the *Star Maiden* affair altogether.

Lady Selena had a moment in the spotlight, given how Lars had called her name in the height of his frenzy, but since she shied away from anyone who tried to approach her as a wild hamster might, most people let her be.

Count Zachary Norden and his servant Walter, considering their role in distracting House Drewleid, were released from all charges against them. The count redoubled his knightly training with his second lease on life, and even Edward joined in an effort to become a better man. The manacite never returned to his halls, however—after Lord Dominic removed the Charm Blessing, it was taken into the royal treasury on the pretense of being a gift from House Norden.

The following installment of Lady Selena's novel about Elizabeth and myself happened to be the final chapter. While the rest of the story was about the two of us talking or going on dates, the last scene was of me proposing to Elizabeth, and she accepted. I nearly cried my eyes out reading it.

What a perfect ending to a perfect novel! Why, I feel ready for anything!

As such, I invited Elizabeth on a date to the circus—the secret outing of my dreams.

“Look, Vince!” she cried as loudly as our undercover status would permit. “That elephant is dancing with a tiger!”

Since we were being discreet, we were careful to avoid using each other's titles, and I had insisted she refer to me as Vince instead of Vincent. We had to practice in the palace for a spell, as she kept on getting flustered about calling my name in public and tying her tongue in knots, but she was a natural now.

“You seem to be enjoying yourself,” I said with a smile.

“It’s all so fantastic... Look, Vince, that man is walking through the air!”

She continued to call out every interesting thing she spotted one by one, taking care to use my name every time. Whenever it passed her lips, I was reminded of her bashful smiles and slip-ups during our hours of practice. Paired with her adorable gasps and grins of wonder, my heart was ready to burst with happiness. Fortunately, Harold wasn’t with us, and instead, two plainclothes guards escorted us.

At least they’re not smirking or silently judging me... Er. No, they are.

I made every effort to split my attention evenly between the performance and Elizabeth out of politeness, but the latter occupied the totality of my mind. Even in the darkness of the stands, her luminous amethyst eyes never left the stage once, her soft golden curls perfectly framing a round face tinged pink with excitement. One moment, her face would be the picture of childish joy, and the next, she would narrow her eyes slightly and sigh with blissful contentment. She was too perfect to be a mere mortal. By the end of the show, I was only spending a quarter of my attention on the performers, but that was to be expected.

After fully enjoying ourselves at the circus, we strolled down Main Street. It was a place she had seen countless times from the window of her carriage, but she seemed thrilled to explore it in person. The road was packed with people and market stalls, most of which were selling souvenirs to tourists. As I peered into a shop window, Elizabeth let out a cry from my side.

“Look, it’s Count Mash Mallows!”

Following her finger, I found a glass rabbit nearly identical to the one she’d given me before. Mine was in my pocket, of course. The store was heavily decorated and bore a large crest on its door of a winged rabbit with the full moon behind it as a halo. It struck me as distinctly familiar, somehow.

“Isn’t that Mother’s house crest?” I wondered aloud.

“It is!” Elizabeth nodded. “Her Majesty designed the Count, and he’s gotten rather popular as of late. I’ve heard that he’s a sign of fate and destined lovers!”

“L-Lovers...?”

“Why, they have Mash Mallow fountain pens, notepads, and paperweights too! This must be their main store! Let’s have a look, Vince!”

With that, she took me by the hand and led me inside. The warmth of her hand alone was too much for my brain to handle, and I nearly blacked out. I’d held her hand at the ball, but she’d never approached me like this before. My heart wouldn’t stop pounding, to the point that I nearly lost my train of thought.

Right... She gave me a good-luck charm for destined lovers and kept one for herself, even. Wouldn’t that mean—?

“I think I’ll buy these, Vince!” she announced with a tug on my arm, interrupting my stream of thought. She had a basket full of merchandise in her hands and a broad smile on her face. “Will you be getting anything?”

Glancing through her basket’s contents, she was getting matching sets of almost everything in colors I recognized from the last rabbits she’d purchased.

“Very well. Allow me to pay, then,” I said.

“No, I’m buying them, so I’ll use my own money.”

“Half of them are for me, aren’t they?”

Please let me be right...I’d die of shame otherwise.

Fortunately, she nodded. “I’d like to pay for them, though.”

“But I’d love the chance to give you a present.”

After haggling, we paid for each other’s half of the goods. Since she had done all the work of choosing what to buy, I searched the store myself and added something of my own to the list. I picked out a pair of handkerchiefs in matching colors, each embroidered with a jaunty chameleon politely bowing. Apparently, his name was Marquis Flamme Brose. I couldn’t fathom what was quite so popular about the designs, but that wouldn’t be the first baffling thing about my mother. Her garden design choices were equally perplexing, after all.

By the time we finished checking out, I had forgotten my questions and instead focused on procuring a midafternoon treat for us. Elizabeth had an incorrigible sweet tooth, and I had the foresight to ask Lady Selena for her

recommended confectionary boutique beforehand. Since we couldn't very well bring poison testers along with us for fear of being too big a group, I had everyone in the stall swapped out with royally vetted chefs ahead of time. They had been practicing for over a week, even, to ensure that we would be tasting the authentic snacks.

The stall's most popular item was a skewer of small donuts, slathered with a generous helping of whipped cream and drizzled with golden caramel. It was quite the cavity-inducing monster, but Elizabeth was ecstatic at the chance to try it.

After accepting our skewers, we took a stroll in the Grand Cathedral's gardens. Though we were still in the last weeks of winter and there were few walkers in the park, the flowerbeds were well-maintained, and we were able to enjoy the early blossoms. The first rays of sunset shone upon the masonry of the cathedral, making for a stunning sight in and of itself. We headed for a bench, our bags dangling between us while we cradled our donuts. I spread my handkerchief on the seat so that Elizabeth's dress wouldn't get dirty, and she thanked me with a smile.

"These look wonderful!" Elizabeth said before enthusiastically biting into her skewer.

I followed suit. The donuts were extremely sweet, as I'd expected, and yet they were surprisingly gentle on the palate and went down with ease. They were slightly crisp on the outside but light and fluffy on the inside, and they harmonized perfectly with the smooth, milky cream and crunchy, cooled caramel.

"Delicious!" Elizabeth giggled.

"I'm glad you like it."

Despite their apparent volume, the donuts were light on the stomach and were the perfect supplement to a day on the town.

These are good.

We focused on our snacks in silence, and before long, we finished.

"That was divine," Elizabeth said with a smile.

My heart skipped a beat. She expected our date to be over with that—I'd told her as much on our itinerary. In truth, I had one last event planned—a matter so important that it was the primary reason for our outing altogether.

"Elizabeth," I said seriously.

"Yes, Vince?" She smiled warmly at me, like a lily coming into bloom. My chest suddenly felt tight.

It had been an enjoyable day, and we were surrounded by the Grand Cathedral and its picturesque gardens. The setting sun bathed us in its warm, orange light. We were engaged in theory, and yet we still lacked one critical thing—and the stage was set to a T.

"Elizabeth, you're the most wonderful partner I could possibly ask for. I wish that you would stay with me forevermore."

"Of course! I'll do everything I can to remain by your side."

She replied as if it were the most natural thing in the world, oblivious to the weight her every word carried for me. I knew she wanted to be with me, but what I truly desired was for her to *love* me, and the depth of my desire was overwhelming. I wanted her to know how deeply I craved her affections. I wanted her to know and to carry my love with her wherever she went. Being nothing more than engaged meant that I could be by her side in body, but I felt hopelessly alone at heart. If the *Star Maiden* incident taught me anything, it was that.

We would be married sooner or later, but that was all the more reason to let her know how I truly felt.

"There's something I need to tell you."

"Yes? What is it?"



She looked up at me with her luminous eyes, and my cheeks grew hot. I couldn't afford to lose to embarrassment—not now. It was a trick of the sun, I told myself. To her, I was a calm, reliable partner. I was cool and composed, but I was the type to let every little word into my heart. If there was any time to use my princely smile, it was now.

“Elizabeth, I... I I-lo...”

Come on, Vincent! You've prepared for this day for years! Do it!

“I I-love—”

—Whether or not I was able to convey my true feelings was a secret that only Elizabeth, I, and the gods would share, now and forevermore.

The End?

Bonus Chapter: This Is Only the Beginning... Isn't It?

MY date with Elizabeth had reached its end. Despite my heart being full to the brim with discontent, I remained calm and composed as I escorted her back to her mansion. Afterwards, I returned home to the palace to find Harold waiting for me. He was wearing a coat unlike anything I'd seen him wear before, as well as a matching scarf. His hair was ruffled in a more casual style than usual.

"I trust your outing proved fruitful?"

He bowed smoothly, but it was all too clear what he had done.

"Seriously? You were watching us?!" I cried.

"I am your servant, guardian, and closest friend. Both Lady Margaret and I were no more than six feet from you the entire time."

"It sounds like you two were on an undercover date of your own."

His expression drooped slightly. "No... I'm afraid I wouldn't call that a *date*."

"Oh."

Lady Margaret was watching Elizabeth the entire time, then.

Harold and I are like two peas in a pod, aren't we? Always so close to our loved ones, yet so far away.

Now wasn't the time to wax poetic, however.

"How did you know?" I asked bluntly.

"Know what? That in the end, you were unable to confess your love to her and said you loved watching her eat sweets?"

"Urgh... Don't remind me."

"Lady Margaret told me."

My heart tightened in distress. That was the last thing I wanted anyone to know, least of all him. Harold ignored my pain as he continued.

“After the day Lady Yulisse jumped into the fountain, Lady Margaret was overcome with regret that she was unable to deduce the contents of Lady Yulisse’s conversation with Lady la Montlivere. She has been practicing lipreading ever since.”

“Does she ever run out of energy...?”

To be frank, Lady Margaret’s boundless determination scared me—and judging from how Harold shook his head and sighed, he was of much the same mind. I resisted the urge to openly sympathize with him as we arrived in my room, and he helped me put my outerwear away.

“I didn’t fail to confess my feelings to her,” I insisted. “I simply decided to put it off.”

“In other words?”

“Well, the whole *Star Maiden* mess is behind us, and I can finally be at her side at the Royal Academy without shame. Why rush into things when we can grow closer naturally?”

“I see. In other words, you don’t want to risk your chance at a genuine friendship with her by telling her you love her out of the blue.”

“Oh, do you have to say it?!”

I threw my coat at him, which he caught, dusted off, and hung in my closet. It had taken me the entire ride home to come up with an excuse I could live with, but he had the nerve to see right through it.

Ah, my poor, fragile heart... If that’s how you want to play, I’ll drag you right down with me!

I jabbed an accusing finger at him. “You haven’t confessed your feelings to Lady Margaret either, have you?!”

He stared at me in silence for a moment before looking up at the ceiling and smiling—a cold, self-deprecating sort of smile.

E-Er... I don’t often see him smile...

The air in the room became palpably thick. He took a few slow steps towards me, and the atmosphere grew colder with each one. With a startling firm grip

on my shoulder, he looked me straight in the eyes and smiled frigidly. I broke out in a cold sweat.

“D-Don’t worry!” I reassured him. “You have two more years until graduation. That’s plenty of time still! Besides, if you keep at it, she’s bound to notice your affections for her eventually! I-If it comes to it, you can go to your father about a formal engagement...”

Harold’s smile didn’t scare me. He couldn’t actually curse people to death with it. He just wasn’t the jovial type. I felt guilty for forcing him to smile over such a trivial matter, that was all. I just wanted him to feel better...right then and there, as soon as humanly possible. So badly that I didn’t even try hiding anything from him.

Oh, drat... Now he knows my backup plan. Even if I continue stumbling about Elizabeth for the next two years, we’ll be married eventually, and I’ll have all the time in the world then.

Only Elizabeth and Harold could shake me so deeply with a mere smile. It faded from his lips and was replaced by a look of deep contemplation.

“Thank you for your kind words, Your Royal Highness.”

“Y-Yes, um... Of course.”

“Should I require your assistance, I pray I will be able to count on you. Would you be willing?”

“N-Naturally. Don’t even ask. I’ll support you however I can, every step of the way.”

“Thank you once again for your infinite kindness,” he said quietly, and his expression lightened as though newfound life had been breathed into him. I could feel his resolve to make his feelings for Lady Margaret known no matter the cost, and it was intense enough to send another trickle of cold sweat down my face.

No... I meant what I said. I’ll support him however I can, and I know that despite his sometimes drastic methods, he would never hurt anyone he cared about so deeply. I know that better than anyone. As fellows in unrequited love, we’ve got to look out for one another.



THE very next month, it was announced that Count Abakaroff's son and Count Falming's daughter—in other words, Harold and Lady Margaret—were engaged. According to Elizabeth, Lady Margaret had been talking her ear off about how wonderful her fiancé was.

Ah. Hello, solitude, my old friend.

Side Story 1: The Lovestruck Prince's Protector is Head-Over-Heels for His Childhood Friend

"I'M gonna marry Harold when I get bigger!" she had said with a grin. "Harold Abarakoff, do you take me, Margaret Falming, to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

They were only children then, with crowns of wildflowers resting on their heads. Nonetheless, as Harold took Margaret's hands in his own and nodded, there was sincerity in both their eyes.

House Abarakoff had been charged with protecting the royal family for generations, and House Falming was responsible for guarding the palace at large. Most of the latter were women, and all the Falming girls were trained extensively in both espionage and the arts of war and awaited the day they would eventually stand at the Queen's side. The Abarakoffs were quite familial with them, both in public and private, and they got along famously. The families had been bound by marriage on multiple occasions.

Harold had known Margaret since they were children. They were as close as siblings. They spent much of their time playing together, and naturally, Harold found he was in love. The thought of spending his life with another woman never crossed his mind. Every word he had spoken to her as a child was the truth, and as he aged, he took care to remove any and all obstacles to their union one by one.

Finally, on the eve of their enrollment in the Royal Academy, Harold resolved to confess his affections to her. He received his parents' blessing and even House Falming's blessing.

He took a knee before her, hand placed over his pounding heart. "I love you, Margaret. Would you marry me?"

It was the first and last such confession of his life, as she readily agreed to. Her reddened cheeks and watery eyes spoke to the affections she in turn had

for him.

Harold's heart was aflutter, much as his master's was, at their chances to finally spend most of their time with their loved ones. Of course, he let none of his joy show on his face.

Then disaster struck, and his dreams were shattered. With the *Star Maiden* incident on everyone's lips, Vincent was unable to spend any time with Elizabeth. As Vincent's sworn protector, he could hardly lie down on the job. Margaret was subsequently assigned to watch Elizabeth at Vincent's command. Harold trusted his fiancée's abilities, and he had long known someone from House Falming would be assigned to Elizabeth eventually. Nonetheless, he was overjoyed that they would likely see more of each other due to sheer proximity.

What awaited him caught him unawares.



HAROLD was deeply troubled. Despite appearing the same as always to the average observer, his heart was a maelstrom of misery. For the first time, he regretted waiting until he came of age to marry his fiancée.

Margaret was obsessed with watching Elizabeth, even when she was off duty. Her amber eyes didn't even blink as she stared at her charge and the prince on a bench not six feet away. They might seem like lovers out enjoying the flowers, but their attention was elsewhere.

"Of course," Margaret said with a heavy sigh. "His Royal Highness just screwed up his confession."

"I had expected as much," Harold replied with a nod.

His master, Crown Prince Vincent von Weissworth, had both his parents' most favorable traits. He was blessed with good looks and a sharp wit. He even had a healthy amount of faith in his abilities—and yet whenever his fiancée was involved, he devolved into an incompetent, blubbering child. He had expected Vincent to fail, but he felt no less disappointed at the result.

If Vincent didn't show some faith in himself—specifically, if he couldn't confess to Elizabeth—then Harold's official engagement to Margaret would keep getting put off. He was stuck precisely where Vincent was. He had even

invited Margaret on an undercover date on the town since they were both off-duty, and yet they somehow ended up stalking the couple every step of the way.

“He said he loves watching her eat sweets. Hah!” Margaret scoffed.

“Don’t tell anyone about that.”

“I know.”

For the first time, Margaret stopped staring at the couple, content that nothing else would happen—and yet he caught her sneaking glances towards their bench. He found it rather charming that she had mastered lipreading in only a month, and he loved how seriously she took her work. However, he couldn’t help but lament that Margaret’s enthusiasm for Elizabeth and Vincent’s relationship eclipsed her interest in him. It was the single largest miscalculation of his life. House Falming had a tendency to be workaholics, but he never assumed it was quite so bad.

After the *Star Maiden* incident had ended, and with it the Coming-of-Age Ball, most of the young nobles of the Academy were on the hunt for a partner. Some of the luckier ones had already announced their engagement. Harold had asked Margaret when they would formally announce their relationship, but her reply was less than favorable.

“Engagement? How am I supposed to worry about my own happiness if Lady Elizabeth is still struggling?”

Just remembering her reply filled his chest with disappointment, but he let none of it show. Any complaint he voiced would end up as a criticism of Vincent’s stunted pace. One of House Abakaroff’s oldest rules was to never question whether one’s own love life or work was more important, and Harold had no idea how to answer such a question anyways. He would gladly give his life for either Margaret or Vincent; that much was certain.

“They seem plenty happy to me,” Harold muttered.

His effort would have to be focused on keeping Margaret interested in him somehow. He cast a sidelong look at Vincent and Elizabeth where they sat, cheeks reddened and chatting amiably. They were the picture of a loving couple

—more satisfying than his own relationship, at least, despite his love for Margaret being requited in no uncertain terms.

Margaret nodded in agreement, but still appeared troubled. “Sure, they’re happy—but don’t you think His Royal Highness could be making Lady Elizabeth even happier by now?”

That was Margaret’s way of saying: *“If only that spineless mudfish of a prince would confess to her already, they wouldn’t have to keep beating around the bush! And I can see Lady Elizabeth glow with true love! I need to see that!”*

Not only that, but announcing an engagement was a time-consuming endeavor, what with the party planning and gifts to consider, and the amount of time she could spend with Elizabeth would likewise decrease. If Vincent successfully confessed his love to Elizabeth, Margaret believed Elizabeth would be too preoccupied to feel her absence. Harold knew how unlikely it was that Vincent would make any progress.

“See, I know Lady Elizabeth doesn’t hate His Royal Highness,” she continued. “She often tells me about how wonderful he is and all that stuff. If he could just seal the deal...”

Tell that to him, not me, Harold thought. However, since Margaret didn’t have any concrete evidence and didn’t want to risk mucking things up between them, she held her silence. In fact, she seemed to love Elizabeth to the point where Harold felt powerless to compete, and he felt more than a little frustration towards his sister-in-law-to-be.

He let out a heavy sigh, unable to stifle it. As fickle as Margaret could be, he loved her nonetheless.



WHILE their date had not gone according to plan, Harold had still enjoyed his outing with Margaret. His only qualm was the way Vincent tried to get back at him with his quip about not making any progress. *She’s a mess, but she’s mine,* he had thought with a wistful smile, but he inadvertently terrified his half brother in the process. Worse, Vincent revealed his ludicrous two-years-of-doing-nothing plan, not to mention that he may never confess his love before they marry.

At that moment, Harold's worries about his own relationship overshadowed his worry for Vincent. He would have to take a more direct hand in the matter.

"Should I require your assistance, I pray I will be able to count on you. Would you be willing?"

"N-Naturally. Don't even ask. I'll support you however I can, every step of the way."

Vincent still seemed scared senseless, but permission was permission. That very weekend, Harold visited the Falming mansion and met with Margaret directly.

"Margaret, a true bodyguard doesn't wait for an opening—they forge one with their own hands. Let's announce our marriage so that you can tell Lady la Montlivere how wonderful it is to be in love. That will give her the greatest chance of moving forward on her own initiative."

His tactic worked like a charm. He felt more than a little sheepish for going behind his master's back so brazenly, but he swore to continue serving Vincent to the end, no matter what.

Side Story 2: I Was Reborn in Another World Without Enough Romance, so I Became a Light Novelist

SELENA regained her memories of her past life when she was fourteen years old.

“Huh...?”

She was so startled she nearly marked the manuscript she was copying from, so she hurriedly put down her pen. Then, she slowly looked around.

She was in the same mansion she’d grown up in, and yet it suddenly felt foreign to her. The ceiling was too tall, and the furniture too rugged. Worst of all, she’d never seen such tacky wallpaper before in her life. Trumpet-playing cupids and roses? Honestly? Her father was a viscount, a noble in name only—and while she had long found their impoverished lifestyle dissatisfying, it was a luxury hotel compared to the 1950s apartment she had lived in before.

Selena pinched her too-long bangs and paled. They were real. She’d read stories about reincarnating in fantasy worlds time and time again, but she never dreamed it would ever happen to her.

In her past life, she was a somewhat introverted seventeen-year-old girl who loved otome games more than anything. She’d been hooked on them ever since that fateful first title she borrowed from her sister in middle school. Before she knew it, she regularly broke the bank on three different gacha games. Her favorites were the ones set in high-society fantasy worlds, including those that involved reincarnation.

The world she was in now vaguely resembled one of the games she’d played, but she couldn’t even remember its name, let alone any details about it. Her best guess was that she had been reincarnated into a proper fantasy world instead of being placed inside a familiar story. There was no point questioning the whys or hows—she was simply stuck with it. All she knew for certain was that her new world had a depressing shortage of books.

Selena had been called a genius from a young age. She learned her letters at a startling pace, and she could parse even the most difficult of passages. That had to be thanks to her past life. Literacy was fairly standard in her old world and not a privilege to be held by the elite alone, as it was in her current world. She was simply used to it. All of her tutors, whether they taught her music, history, or philosophy, were astounded by her swift progress.

Her father didn't understand her gifts, but he nonetheless emptied the family coffers to send her to the Royal Academy. At the time, she was overjoyed at the chance, but she found herself racked with guilt. Thus, she decided to use her gift of reading and writing to help support her family as a scribe. There were working printing presses in the world, but they often skipped sections or misprinted, and the nobility valued traditional hand-copied books more to begin with. She would fill crisp white page after page with her elegant hand and use her wages to put herself through school.

Selena loved precision work, and she enjoyed copying greatly. She had naturally assumed that if she increased her prices and workload little by little, she could save enough to get through school. And yet, as she copied story after story, something was missing.

Every time she read about a princess who was kidnapped by a crooked villain or a prince who overcame fantastic odds in his quests, she felt unfulfilled. She could write better stories—she knew of even more beautiful princesses and even grander tales of high romance. Yet she was tortured by the fact that the details were always just out of reach.

Her scant memories taunted her for years before it all came flooding back to her on that fateful day. Memories of otome games and their companion novels; polished gems that were refined over decades of subculture. The characters were depicted in the most intimate detail. The emotional moments hit all the right notes. Some even allowed the reader to insert themselves into the tale.

In comparison, her current world's stories were at 18th-century standards. Novels were the truest form of escapism in an age devoid of cameras or television. The books were written in the form of hearsay to highlight their fantastic nature; the characters' internal conflicts were written out in intimate

detail; and the characters would wander through real landmarks in their epic quests. Most bestsellers followed that basic template.

In Selena's opinion, there was one critical shortcoming—they failed to appeal to her emotionally. And so, she took pen to paper, resolving to fix that flaw with her own hands.



AFTER three-odd years of writing and one year after enrolling in the Royal Academy, she had become a decently successful novelist. She earned enough money to be able to afford her own school fees, and she only needed one more solid book to pay the rest of her way through school.

She had plenty of ideas from the otome games she'd played, and it wasn't technically plagiarism since those games didn't exist in her new world. Her main appeal was that her novels were easy to understand and filled with fantasy and romance. In the words of her publisher, the strength of her writing itself was second-rate, but it was appealing enough to sell well.

Most novels in that world were written by eccentrics, pumping out massive tomes whenever the fancy struck them. By comparison, Selena's works were quick to write and easy to read, and they left a deep impression on the market. She made heavy use of first-person perspective to make the reader feel a more immediate attachment to the action, and she kept the material light but peppered it with little mysteries.

Most of the best one-liners were things she wanted someone to say to her in real life. Her characters were all attractive, without exception. Her settings were always highly personal and relatable instead of being far-off fantasy realms, but she filtered everything through a rose-tinted lens. They were easy to lose oneself in and left the reader feeling light and refreshed.

In other words, she reinvented light novels in another world.

Her works were mass-printed on small sheets of pulp paper, bound with a cheap spine of cord, and sold broadly. She didn't possess any notable talent with prose, so she was unable to match the lofty poetics of the nobility—not to mention that if she did, her side hustle would be exposed to her peers. Instead, she opted for quantity over quality, content with her modest popularity and

niche markets.

Another day passed, and Selena found herself hunched over her manuscript yet again. It had taken several years to build a readership, but she was decently well-established. Her scribblings had caught the hearts of many a commoner, and the wealth of her experience had seen her compositional skills and rhetorical prowess advance by leaps and bounds. Every novel she penned only furthered her skills.

After her time in the Academy, she had a firm grasp of what elite schools in this world were like. She caught glimpses of the lavish lifestyles of the elite. They seemed so fantastic and alien that she had a hard time exchanging more than a few odd words with them, but that was for the best. It was important that she keep to the commoners' aesthetics in her writing.

"Yes... Yes, I can do this!"

Her grey matter spilled out of her head and onto the page, and her cheeks flushed with excitement. The time had finally come, and she would make this latest work the most potent of them all. It was a copy of that fated work that had ensnared her in her previous life, which triggered her obsession with otome games. Its name was *Even the Stars Cry Upon the Holy Maiden*.



A full year passed after that fateful day. Selena was now pale and trembling in terror. Her editor—the only one who knew she was an author, a secret not even her family was privy to—grinned broadly. He rubbed his nose, leaving a smidge of black ink behind.

"C'mon, now! I swear, if those snooty old nobles find out, I'll shut up shop myself! I'll never breathe a word about you or your writing, so relax, will you?"

"Th-Th-That's not the problem!"

"Look, miss, this stuff is *gold*. Nobody in their right mind would let something like this pass them by. I'll push it to the end, okay?"

"D-Don't push it at all! Wh-What if His Royal Highness or the duke finds out? What then?! What if I get arrested?!"

“I said I’d close shop, didn’t I? Then we can just swap a few names around and publish it again. Got any ideas for a new pen name?”

“You’re expecting them to find out, aren’t you?!”

Selena let out a weak wail of despair as the editor laughed her off again. She regretted ever writing that mess. At the time, she was too engrossed in her craft and her hopes that recent events would push her novel to think it through. It was foolish of her to model the characters after real people.

The heroine was Selena herself. The hero was her own kingdom’s crown prince, in quite recognizable detail. Worst of all, she’d made the prince’s fiancée and a duke’s daughter the antagonists.

It had seemed harmless enough at first, and she only realized the gravity of her mistake when it was too late. The editor had a far larger appetite for wealth and fame than Selena herself, and he wanted to publish as much of her work as possible, since quantity was her trademark. He paid through the nose to double the amount of illustrations, and the hero and villainess were drawn in such a likeness to the real people that they were practically caricatures.

The only character who changed was the heroine, who had larger eyes than Selena and appeared significantly more outgoing. Worst of all, Selena was only given her comp copy after several hundred volumes had already been printed, and by then, it was too late to change the editor’s mind.

“Did you know my dad’s a merchant, just like the heroine here?” he recounted with a chuckle. “This’ll be a huge hit, I swear!”

“Ohh...” Selena moaned as she collapsed to the floor.

It’s over. I’m done for. What if they lock me up? Or sentence me to house arrest? No, if they find out I’m a noble they might expel me from the Academy, or even take away my birthright...

As the editor celebrated, Selena found herself praying that she would get reincarnated again and put out of her misery.



SEVERAL months passed without Selena getting arrested. What did happen

was far worse. Someone who happened to look just like *Star Maiden's* heroine showed up, and she wasted no time in ensnaring the Knight Commander's son. Some rumors even claimed that she had leaped straight from the book's pages, and the crown prince and his fiancée began acting startlingly distant—even if the former couldn't pry his eyes away from the latter.

What's going on here?

The heroine didn't really exist. That much Selena knew better than anyone. The only explanation she could come up with was that she had some unknown power that could bring her characters to life. The thought made her blood run cold. She had specifically set out to write something relatable and close at hand—a realistic romance. She had only used real people to add extra spice to her tale on a whim. Now her creation had taken on a horrible life of its own. She—her own work—ripped apart a real, living couple and threw the entire Academy into chaos.

I'm so sorry, you two!

She regretted her work from the bottom of her heart. If her stories had the power to shape reality, however, there was a way for her to bring the pair back together again. It would take every scrap of her skill as a writer and her full knowledge of otome games, but she would write a grand romance that exuded realism. She poured hour after hour into the work, fervently praying that the crown prince and the duke's daughter would be reunited once more.

The last thing she could have expected was that the prince himself would become her most avid reader.

Extra 1: My Rival, the Cat

APPARENTLY, Elizabeth had adopted a cat.

“I’m so sorry, Prince Vince. He becomes so lonely and despondent when I’m not around that he doesn’t even eat. Don’t worry, he’s extremely polite and won’t cause any trouble for you.”

She seemed bashful as she explained the bundle of pitch-black fur on her lap. He was perfectly round and pleased with the cushion her skirt was providing him. He didn’t move a muscle.

I wouldn’t call him polite, though—not with the way he’s glaring at me.

He hadn’t broken eye contact with me once yet, and the way he was looking down his nose at me, I swore he was wondering what I was doing there.

No, I’m asking the questions here! Who do you think you are, interrupting my and Elizabeth’s stay-at-home date?!

His plush fur spoke to how lovingly he’d been stroked.

You’re definitely a male, aren’t you, you little third wheel?

“Where did he come from?” I asked Elizabeth flatly.

“He wandered into our garden, and he was so skinny, it looked like the poor dear hadn’t eaten in a while. He was probably someone’s pet once.” She gave the little furball a piteous look.

I see now. She pampers you a little, and suddenly you’re inseparable? I suppose he has some standards, though, given how deeply he appreciates her saintly kindness.

I forgave his earlier misdemeanor and smiled warmly at the cat. I was her fiancé, after all. I outranked him in every sense of the word.

“What’s his name?” I asked.

“Fleur.”

“Why, that’s adorable. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Fleur,” I said as I crouched down to his level. “My name is Vincent.”

See? Utmost poise and elegance, and above all, humility. I win, feline.

Elizabeth was a tad startled to see me hunch down so suddenly, but she maintained her composure. Fortunately, I knew exactly how to treat an animal. I’d never covered the topic formally, but Lady Selena had described the process in detail in her novel. Cats dislike being touched on the head by a stranger. It was best to be deferential in one’s approach.

I extended my hand flat out towards him, showing that my palm was empty and that I meant no harm. Fleur began lashing his tail swiftly, and the fur along his spine rose like needles. Then he swiped. A paw full of hooklike claws left a stinging sensation in my hand.

“Gah?!”

“Fleur!” Elizabeth scolded, but I stopped her.

“I’m fine.”

I wasn’t so base as to get angry at him for swatting at me. No, the problem was that when he hit me, I felt the distinct tingling of magic.



WHEN I arrived at Raphael’s mansion, Lady Yulisse was standing behind him. At the sight of me, she wrinkled her nose in disgust, and while she didn’t say a thing, it was clear she wanted to retch.

That’s...less than polite. My poor pride.

“Come now,” Raphael said without so much as turning around. He’d likely seen my expression change slightly. “Mind your manners.”

Lady Yulisse paled at his words and teared up a little. “I-It’s been some time, Your Royal Highness. I’m dreadfully sorry for all the misfortune and hardships I put you and your fiancée through.”

“Uh...” I floundered for the words before shifting into prince mode. “It’s, um... Don’t forget the debt you owe House Marshall, now.”

She was terrified—not of me but of Raphael, and I didn’t know how manners dictated I should act.

“Oh, I’m deeply grateful. Eternally so.” She curtsied. Her balance and overall bearing had improved greatly.

After that, an awkward silence inched longer and longer as neither of us knew what to say or do. Finally, Raphael cut in.

“Why don’t you prepare something for His Royal Highness, Yulie?”

She obediently curtsied once more before leaving the room and returned a few minutes later with a platter of snacks. It seemed she had every intention of learning proper manners after all.

“It’ll be a few years until she’s allowed to leave the grounds,” Raphael said with a wink, “but Father’s willing to vouch for her after that, so long as she’s diligent. Not only that, having experience as a live-in servant could benefit her in the future.”

“You’ve really thought this out, haven’t you?”

“I’d prefer she stayed here forever, of course.”

He gave her a sidelong look, and her fake smile failed to conceal her terror. She was so eager to be taken into a marquis’ household, but living in such close quarters with Raphael was taking its toll. It was risky for him to have her here at all, what with how much Father disliked her. In fact, it was almost as though Father knew what she would have to put up with at this house.

Am I surrounded by sadists? I wondered.

“I’m almost impressed you can handle it,” I muttered under my breath.

“Oh, it’s nothing, really,” he returned in a low voice. “I was with her longer than anyone else, so maybe her Charm hasn’t left my system yet.”

What?

“Don’t you have a Ward?” I asked him.

“Why, of course not.”

“Then how...?”

“I’ve got some resistance to magic through sheer experience, but any Ward strong enough to shrug off a Blessing so easily would empty our house’s coffers and then some. Only the royals are privy to that. Why, you could say I’m utterly, *intimately* exposed.”

“Oh.”

In other words, Raphael worked relentlessly to see my plan through, despite being on the full receiving end of Lady Yulisse’s Blessing the whole time. He had planned this from the beginning; his every movement was formulated to bring Lady Yulisse to his side and keep her there no matter what. They say that even fools are masters of their trade, and while I had never been able to make heads or tails of the phrase before, Raphael embodied it perfectly.

No, that can’t be the best expression for this. Something about love taking as love gives, maybe?

As I lost myself in my musings, Raphael took a slow sip of his tea and smiled. Lady Yulisse had prepared the tea to perfection, and even now she was standing with stiff attention behind him.

On second thought, maybe I should leave this topic alone.

“Let me get to the point,” I said.

“Why, I was hoping you’d do so myself,” he replied with a playful smile, and I resisted the urge to tense up just as Lady Yulisse had.

I explained the mysterious black cat to Raphael and he nodded thoughtfully.

“Perhaps you’re so jealous of the cat you’re imagining things?” he suggested. “Sorry, that was a poor joke.”

Lady Yulisse shot me a look of undisguised pity and disgust. Ever since she realized she had no chance of being with me, she’d started acting a little too frank.

I’m glad I left Harold behind. If he were here, he’d make the same face as her.

“I’m not imagining things, and I’m *not* jealous of a feline. Even I know how scandalous sitting in her lap would be.”

“It’d be best if I could see the cat in question personally—if only a certain

someone didn't forbid me from getting anywhere near his fiancée," Raphael quipped.

The cat issue wasn't enough to change my mind on that front. After seeing him with Lady Yulisse, I knew more than ever that letting him anywhere near Elizabeth would be disastrous.

He put a hand on his chin, gazing up at the ceiling. "Come to think of it, there's a spell that could turn you into a cat. Then you'd be able to hash things out with Elizabeth's furry black friend directly."

"Really? That sounds promising."

"It takes a great deal of training in order for your body to be able to handle it, and even then, it's *incredibly* painful."

"P-Painful?"

"You'd literally be defiling the laws of nature, after all. Of course it'd be painful."

"Er... Do I have any other options? Anything quicker and easier to undergo? I'd also prefer not to turn into anything else on the off-chance I'm unable to turn back."

I wasn't afraid of the pain, of course. Not at all.

But wait... I could have Elizabeth's lap all to myself if I were a cat...!

"There is a spell that enables you to speak with cats," he offered. "You'd have to cram a lot of cat logic into your head in a very short amount of time, so I've heard it induces an unspeakably agonizing headache."

"Agonizing...?"

Isn't there any magic that wouldn't hurt me? Is magic really so cruel?

"We could take our time with the process, so it doesn't hurt. I imagine we could finish in about a year."

"I can't wait that long." As I let out a sad sigh, Raphael sniggered with a sadistic gleam in his eyes. "Wait... There *is* a better method, isn't there?"

I should've brought Harold along after all. He had a talent for extracting the

truth from Raphael without having to run around in circles. Borrowing a page from his book, I gave Raphael my best, icy glare. I'd practiced princely glares alongside my princely smiles for just such an occasion, but it had no effect on him. I did, however, terrify poor Lady Yulisse.

When I went back to my regular expression, Raphael drooped slightly, as if disappointed.

I let out an irritated sigh. "Would you stop enjoying the poor girl's suffering and tell me already?"

Does he have eyes in the back of his head? How does he always know what she's doing?

He shrugged offhandedly, but even that harmless gesture put her on guard. I started to feel sorry for her, even.

"There's a spell that can put the caster's mind into a cat, or even vice versa. Of course, it takes quite a bit of effort and a large source of mana to make a cat into a familiar like that."

"A mage...? That's it!"

The man who had been used and taken captive by House Drewleid came to mind.

Raphael nodded. "I heard him mention that his pet cat had gone missing during his imprisonment. He didn't mention anything about the cat being a familiar, but it wouldn't surprise me if that was the case."

"It's all coming together now."

From what I'd heard, the mage had been kept at the Drewleid mansion ever since he incanted the Charm Blessing into that piece of manacite. It'd make sense that his familiar was unable to locate him during that time, and after wandering for some time, the cat found its way to Elizabeth's garden.

"If that's the case, then we won't have to worry about the cat hurting Elizabeth. I'll look into getting him back to his master," I said.

Raphael nodded with a smirk. "Good. You'd best hurry. It wouldn't do to have another male occupy your fiancée's thighs, would it?"

I'm not jealous, I swear!



I contacted the mage through Marquis Dominic. From the sounds of it, Fleur was indeed his familiar. I passed the word on to Elizabeth, who brought him to the palace.

Fleur's inky-black fur rippled and shone as he strutted about the room, exploring every nook and cranny. He seemed like a different cat from the furball that had occupied Elizabeth's lap so adamantly before.

"He's not as cuddly today, is he, Liza?"

"A few days ago, he suddenly mewed at me once and refused to come anywhere near me after that." Elizabeth shook her head in confusion. "That was the only time he's ever made a sound. Ever since then, he's been acting as though he saved me. I suppose he's more of a dashing knight than a handsome little flower."

She gave him a look of pure admiration, as if she'd forgotten that very feline had swatted my hand away the last time we met.

I really hope she did forget that...

If what Elizabeth said was true, Fleur likely did protect her somehow. He was a familiar, and I didn't put such an act past him. There had to be a reason behind his actions.

I extended my hand toward him, and he was a lot more amicable today. I picked him up. His eyes narrowed. He looked decidedly displeased for the first time since he began sniffing out the room. I wanted to glare right back at him, but to be the bigger man, I only smiled.

"I found your master, Fleur. Aren't you happy?"

"Isn't that wonderful?" Elizabeth asked him giddily, stroking his lush fur. "I'll still be sad to see you go, of course."

She was close, very close to me, and even through Fleur's little body, my jacket, and my shirt, I swore I could feel her hands on my chest, as implausible as it sounded. I tried very hard to focus on Fleur instead.

He looked up at me and snorted haughtily. *"I suppose I should thank you, mew."*

Did... Did he just talk?

The words echoed inside my head. Human language was too difficult for his feline vocal cords to pronounce, so telepathy was probably easier for him. If nothing else, he confirmed that he was a familiar for us.

Thinking it would be unnatural to stand there staring at him, I tickled the soft spot under his chin. *"Elizabeth is my fiancée,"* I tried to tell him telepathically. *"Tell me if you ever notice she's in danger."*

He looked straight up into my eyes before blinking slowly, and he let out a low, rumbling purr.

"Oh, Fleur!" Elizabeth giggled. *"I see you've made up with Prince Vince!"*

"He's awfully cute." As soon as I said that, he abruptly stopped purring.

"Oh, come on, I was only being polite," I told him. *"Be an adult, will you?"*

With that, he readily started purring again.

"He's so adorable!" she chuckled again.

"So? What happened?" I asked him telepathically.

"I suppose I can tell you, mew," he drawled slowly. *"There was a nasty shadow of a man with the princess, a foul thing with a dark aura, mew."*

A man...?

"It would glare at me to no end, mew. Just as you did, mew."

"Hey, you started it! Er, I mean, that sounds serious."

Fleur hopped out of my arms and landed elegantly on the ground before rolling onto his back. *"You're mewserable at carrying me, mew. Now rub my belly, mew."*

"You little scoundrel! Do you think you can say whatever you want, just because Elizabeth likes you?!" Nonetheless, I smiled warmly as I tickled his tummy, and he squirmed about blissfully.

"A dark aura, huh... I can think of one man who might fit the bill perfectly."

"It was just the ghost of the man's dark desires, mew," Fleur continued offhandedly. *"Master mewntioned that specters like that can even cut your life short if done poorly, so it should never be done, mew."*

"As I thought, I know just one former noble obsessed with Elizabeth enough to try dark magic like that."

Come to think of it, he had bragged to me about how talented a mage he was in the past, and he pestered Lord Dominic time and time again to drop me as his pupil and tutor him instead. It seemed he was talented at more than just blowing hot air.

My expression grew dire, but Fleur let out a snort of derision. *"I made mousemeat of it, mew. One good swat was all it took, mew."*

"Really? Well, thank you for that. I owe you."

"It's a knight's duty to protect his princess, mew."

I somehow doubted that a real knight would hit me with that same magical swat, but I decided not to push it.

"The princess has a worrying number of pawthetic, mewserable men around her, doesn't she, mew?" Fleur said as he shot me a sidelong look.

That hardly seemed like any way to treat me, especially after I let him off the hook. I considered threatening him with a visit to my parents, but decided against it.

"You can leave the rest of the cleanup to me," I told him. *"Get back to your real master already."*

"Fine, mew."

With that, he stood up and bolted between Elizabeth's legs, right under her skirt, and rubbed his face against her shin with a plaintive meow.

"Oh, you came to say goodbye?" Elizabeth gave him a sad smile. *"I'll miss you too, sweetie."*

She picked him up and gave him a scratch behind his ears, and he purred. He

was only being polite, of course.

“Make sure he reaches his master, Prince Vince,” she told me as she handed him over to me.

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure of it.”

“Thank you. Also, I realize I might be overstepping my bounds a little, but I brought one of his favorite treats with me.” She blushed, averting her gaze. “My maid already passed it on to Lord Harold. It’s a lightly steamed dish, made from chicken, duck, and some healthy vegetables. Could you see he gets some at his mealtime?”

“Of course. I’ll see to it myself.”

I tried my best to smile warmly at the depth of her affection for Fleur, but it was all I could do to keep from screaming.

“Fleur, you felicitous furball! She’s never made me anything, but you get to eat food she made herself?! Er, made by her direct orders, that is, not her own cooking, but still! She doesn’t even know my favorite foods yet because I’m forced to say everything I put in my mouth is delicious out of sheer politeness! Do you have any idea how lucky you are?!”

I shot Fleur a hard look, and he seemed a little intimidated by my intensity. Nonetheless, he snorted haughtily.

“If you ask pawlitely, you may have a bite, mew.”

“Really?! Yes, please!”

He looked at me with a mixture of shock and amazement. For the first and possibly last time in my life, I had caught the cat’s tongue.



AFTER putting Fleur safely inside a wisteria-wood crate and loading him into a carriage, he was sent to his master’s side. Apparently, the mage was now working in a workshop under House Marshall’s direct supervision. As soon as he was underway, I sent a message to Lars. It read: *“Enjoying your time in house arrest, are you? Approach Elizabeth again by any means, and I’ll tell my parents on you.”*

The contents struck me as a tad juvenile, but he would understand the letter as the threat that it was. I could only imagine Lars paling in horror as he read its contents.

When the messenger returned, I received the most curious report. Apparently, there was a set of thin, red scars on Lars' cheek, as though a cat had gotten the best of him.

Extra 2: A Tantalizing Luncheon

AFTER a great deal of fuss and worry, Elizabeth and the Duke and Duchess la Montlivere were invited to the palace for lunch. It was a long story, but an interesting one.

On the day Fleur stayed in the palace before returning to his master, my parents returned home at their usual hour despite other plans, just as Fleur was about to be fed. As soon as they heard about the cat's meal—the equivalent of Elizabeth's home cooking—they were determined to sneak bites for themselves. I had to be the adult and remind them that the king and queen should be above eating cat food, and not just because I wanted to eat it myself. Fortunately, I convinced them, and they realized in the process that Elizabeth was ignorant of my favorite foods. Even if we were engaged, she didn't have many chances to dine with the royal family.

My parents exercised their full authority in the most responsible way possible in order to have Elizabeth's cooking at a scale beyond mere cat food. They sent a letter to House la Montlivere requesting a full list of Elizabeth's favorite foods, which His Grace readily and unquestioningly provided. Our lunch, then, would consist of half of my favorites and half of Elizabeth's.

Our little lunch banquet started with a quick toast, and then the appetizers were brought out. Flowers and sculptures of rabbits standing on their haunches adorned the table in a fashion that appealed perfectly to Mother's sensibilities.

"Come to think of it, Prince Vincent, I don't believe I know what you like to eat the most," Elizabeth said with a smile.

That was the overt purpose of our lunch, and her angelic demeanor told me that she was eager to hear the answer. Father told me something to that same effect a few days earlier.

"We thought it would be unusual if We only had your favorites prepared," Father told her imperiously. "We saw it as an opportunity to further mutual

understanding. Were We correct?”

What Father didn't say was that they had no idea what I liked either. All they knew were the foods I used to hate, and there was a compelling reason for that.

“Yes. I'm rather glad,” I replied with a smile to Elizabeth before turning my attention to the food.

Since the main dish was slated to be a meat dish of my choosing, most of the appetizers appealed more to Elizabeth's taste buds. There was a good deal of steaming yellow bread, an equally yellow soup, and a decidedly yellow bowl of mashed potatoes. Only one explanation came to mind.

“Elizabeth? Do you mind if I ask what your favorite food is?” I asked.

Her cheeks turned a shade of rose pink. It was easy to determine the common factor between all her recipes, but the colors made it even more apparent. Her sweet tooth ruled her palate.

“P-Pumpkin,” she stammered shyly.

The bread was cut into bite-sized pieces, and each of them had a well-rounded sweetness to it. It was nicely complemented by the salted butter. I easily understood her love of it.

“Pumpkin... I see. It brightens the table, and I've heard it's highly nutritious. It's a wonderful fruit.”

If I had been engaged to anyone except Elizabeth, I wouldn't have complimented pumpkins if my life depended on it. But luckily, I loved Elizabeth, and that was the only reason I needed.

She looked up at me in blissful surprise, her eyes full of joy at having found a fellow pumpkin-lover.

I'm so glad I overcame my hatred of that miserable plant, I thought from the bottom of my heart.



MY secret beef with pumpkins went back as far as that fateful day I fell for Elizabeth and the night I spent crying into my pillow. That was when I decided to improve my personality as well as study for the throne. One of my most

fervent areas of study was systematically overcoming every food I hated. Even though there was nothing wrong with not liking everything, I would've grown up no less of an adult regardless. Engrossed in my youth and my love, however, I was intolerant of my less presentable qualities.

Back then, I was shorter than Elizabeth, even when I wore a slight heel, much to my own chagrin. It didn't even occur to me then that Elizabeth was wearing heels herself.

"If you don't get more nutrients, you'll be short forever," Mother warned me at dinner, and for the first time, I saw genuine shame in those words. I regretted my every food choice up to that point, and it forged a newfound resolve within me.

From that day forward, I would never hate a food again. If I didn't eat Elizabeth's favorite foods, she would come to loathe me. If I couldn't eat what she didn't like, we could never be together.

My first target was my archnemesis, the dreaded pumpkin. It was somewhat watery, as any gourd should be, and yet it could range anywhere from puzzlingly dry to obnoxiously wet depending on how it was prepared. Worse, it was impossible to categorize it as either sweet or bitter when its skin was left on, making it impossible to get a decent hold on. Even Father had a hard time with pumpkin, try as he did to hide it.

Nonetheless, I had the servants serve me nothing but pumpkin for every meal. Pumpkin bread, pumpkin soup, pumpkin salad—I swallowed it along with my bitter tears, envisioning the day I might finally come to terms with that most ghoulish of gourds.



PUTTING down the pumpkin bread, I swallowed a spoonful of the pumpkin soup. It was chilled nicely, a perfect complement to a lunchtime meal, and the flavor was deep yet mellow. I had much to look forward to from the rest of the dishes.

Elizabeth likewise drank down spoonful after spoonful of soup, a gentle smile on her face as she ate. Everything on the table so far had been her favorites, and even the servants snuck smiles at her, despite how hard they attempted to

remain professional.

Ha! Elizabeth has been an absolute goddess for years, and you're just noticing now? It's taking all my parents and I have to keep ourselves from melting from her glow, so the least you could do is not smile! Besides, when we're married, she'll be smiling like this every day! Er...wait. That means we'll be having nothing but pumpkins for all our meals, doesn't it?

"It all tastes so lovely!" Elizabeth said giddily. "Your chefs must be incredibly talented."

"I'll make sure to pass your compliments on to the chefs, then," I replied. "They'll be overjoyed to hear you enjoyed the meal."

"Allow Us to thank you as well," Father cut in. "The recipes you have provided to Us are of a quality We would welcome at Our table on a daily basis."

"Good food makes life a good deal more pleasant, doesn't it?" Mother smiled reservedly. "I wish we could have this every day."

I tried not to outright glare at my parents for cutting in and stealing my spotlight. Even the duke and duchess seemed surprised.

Cut that out, both of you. Eating the same things every day won't make Elizabeth feel any more welcome here, you know.

"Oh, please, you're flattering me," Elizabeth replied bashfully.

"We simply stated the truth," Father insisted.

Father and Mother gave her their best kingly and queenly smiles, respectively. Even the duke and duchess seemed pleased by this turn of events.

"Did you know Vincent used to eat pumpkin for every meal?" Mother chuckled.

"Ah, We remember that!"

"Really?!" Elizabeth turned to face me, her eyes sparkling. "I didn't know you loved pumpkin so much!"

"I still love it," I insisted. "I think I like it even more after today."

Father had a point—there was something about the pumpkin's natural flavor

profile that fit its variable texture beautifully. Not only that, but I would associate pumpkins with her from now on. It readily shot to the top of my list of favorite fruits.

The conversation naturally shifted to our childhoods, and we continued to eat through lunch with smiles. As we talked, however, I realized something that I couldn't help but find curious. Most of the cooking staff were unchanged from the old days, back when I was still a snot-nosed brat.

I wonder what they thought when they saw the recipes Elizabeth sent?



AT that very moment, elsewhere in the palace, a footman stepped into the kitchens with a tray of cleared dishes. He couldn't wait until he was fully inside before his professional demeanor was replaced by sheer joy.

"Hey guys, they love the pumpkin dishes!" he announced, trying as hard as he could to keep his voice low.

As servants of the royal family, they were forbidden from making unnecessary noise during their tasks. Even so, the footman's enthusiasm spread through the kitchen like wildfire. The chefs blushed, and not from the heat of their stoves.

"Even His Royal Highness and his fiancée loved it," he continued. "You should've seen them eat. Why, Her Majesty was beside herself!"

"Really?" the closest chef asked in surprise. "His Royal Highness liked it? How was he acting?"

"His Royal Highness has always loved pumpkin, hasn't he? He's been eating it since he was little, so of course he appreciated it."

The chefs exchanged knowing looks. The footman was young and new to the palace halls. He wasn't there eight years ago, nor was he privy to the prince's secret.

When they received word the prince was hosting a luncheon for his fiancée, the whole kitchen hall was overjoyed and gladly accepted their new task. Their happiness rapidly waned when they realized the amount of pumpkin on the menu. They had made almost the exact same dishes for the prince eight years

ago.

Not one servant who knew the prince's past failed to give thanks for their young lord's insight. In his passion, he had ended the war with the dreaded pumpkins before it had even begun, and the chefs were intimately familiar with how to properly handle the gourd. They had been nervous about serving the first course, as pumpkin had been absent from the dining tables for a while, but their fears proved unfounded.

The head chef and sous-chef chuckled at each other.

"I'm glad His Royal Highness liked it."

"Nice going, Your Highness. You're a real good egg."

"He's come so far since the old days."

They both remembered how often young Vincent would send his vegetables back and cheered him on from the kitchens as he struggled to better his eating habits. Back in the day, they were beside themselves with worry that Vincent was pushing himself too hard. Food was meant to be enjoyed, not suffered through. He had left them pleasantly surprised, however, and they were overjoyed to have played a part.

Besides, even if they were ordered to prepare no end of green peppers and pumpkins to torment the prince, they were on a salary and had their own livelihoods to consider. It was one of the distinct disadvantages of being a royal servant.

"His fiancée is a rare one herself," the footman went on. "Why, she's like a sunflower, always bathed in the sun's golden warmth—or maybe a mountain stream, pure and refreshing at even the coldest hour."

Nobody stopped him from going on, for they were all in agreement.

"I hope she moves in soon," the sous-chef wondered aloud.

"Yeah," nodded the head chef. "We'd better sharpen our pumpkin-cooking skills for their wedding."

"Their cake has to be perfect, too."

"Course. We'll be giving them food to knock their royal socks off for every

day of their lives, mark my words.”

Most of them had never laid eyes on the rumored fiancée, but the tales they’d heard could last them a lifetime. She was a perfect angel, one they all dreamed of serving one day.

Side Story 3: What the Future Holds

THE engagement announcement ball at the Abakaroff mansion took my breath away. Of all the high-ranking lords and ladies in attendance, Margaret stood out the most in her vibrant dress, a testament to her role as the bride-to-be. It was a lovely milky yellow, and the puffy sleeves and skirt made her look like a tantalizing dollop of buttercream. I was used to her high-energy antics, but she was just as stunning now. All eyes were on her and her fiancé, the very images of happiness.

Perhaps the most surprising part of the entire affair was how different Lord Harold seemed. I had only ever seen him behind Prince Vincent with a cool expression, but now his eyes overflowed with warmth as he looked at Lady Margaret. His impassive expression melted away so slowly and naturally that he likely failed to notice the change himself, which made his transformation seem all the more wholesome. Joy is contagious, or so they say.

“Hehe! Look at how happy Lord Harold is!” I tugged on Prince Vincent’s arm and pointed.

He shook his head, smiling in resignation. “So he can smile, can he?”

I chuckled at his quip. His Royal Highness had been so expressive lately, as if he were slowly easing up around me. The thought filled me with pure joy.

Our relationship had changed quite a bit following the incident at the Coming-of-Age Ball. I was surprised when he took a knee before me to apologize the first time we were alone after the incident. When he looked up and realized how shocked I was, he swore to be more forthcoming with his emotions so as not to be misunderstood.

Throughout our secret date together and even now at the banquet, we were determined to make our relationship known. It would take a lot more than the odd rumor to separate us.

I tightened my grip on his arm. “Don’t worry, Prince Vincent. You’ll always

have me.”

Lord Harold was his maternal half-brother. They’d been together for so long that I’d never be able to compete with him in that sense. Nonetheless, I wanted to be with His Royal Highness, so there had to be some way I could prove my worth to him.

At my words, Prince Vincent blushed. His expression quickly shifted to a more composed smile, but I knew that my feelings had reached him all the same.

“Hm...?”

I had an inkling that we were being watched, and I turned to find Lady Margaret staring at us with frightening intensity. Lord Harold gave me an apologetic smile. No doubt they wanted to greet us without being rude. Prince Vincent was the highest-ranking person in attendance, and they could hardly talk to anyone else before receiving his blessing.

“Why don’t we go say hello, Your Royal Highness?” I gave Lady Margaret a nod, and her face lit up in ecstasy.

I knew she wanted to say hello to him.

Prince Vincent escorted me across the busy ballroom floor. Lord Harold and Lady Margaret seemed full of hope, and I didn’t doubt that Prince Vincent’s and my own future would be just as bright.

When I first met the prince at the tender age of eight, he was smaller than I was in my heels. He didn’t say a word to me then, but his eyes were so full of emotion that I could tell he was intent on assessing me as his potential future queen.

I cast a sidelong glance at him. The child I had met then was gone, and I had to look up to meet his eyes now. He was brimming with composure and grace. A warm sensation grew in my chest. It would be a faux pas to bring this sensation up in front of the new couple, but I wouldn’t be able to say anything after the ball out of embarrassment. Instead, I drew a half-step closer to him and whispered in his ear.

“I would love to stay at your side forevermore, Prince Vince.”

“L-Liza...”

His eyes widened with shock, and I knew that I had shamefully overstepped my bounds. The mood must have gotten to me. Worse, actually saying it was far more embarrassing than I had assumed, and I was unable to look up from the ballroom floor.

“Nngh...!”

For a moment, I thought I heard a voice—no, two voices—trying desperately not to say anything, but I must have been imagining things.

The End Until Volume 2!

Bonus Short Story: Mary, the Little Lamb

ONCE upon a time, there was a little sheep. She had no name, yet she was no ordinary livestock. In her wanderings, she stumbled upon a mandragora, a horrific root that drove mortals mad with its shrill cries whenever it left its abode in the earth. Snow came heavy and early that year, and at a loss for other food, the lamb filled her belly on the hell-root's leaves. Mana coursed unbridled through her veins, warping her into a monstrosity.

The rest of the flock noticed her transformation and, dubbing her the strongest sheep to have ever lived, surrendered control of the herd to her. The once-little lamb fought tooth and hoof to protect her herd. One by one, her enemies fell. Before long, not even the fiercest of wolves or the hungriest of bears could oppose her might.

Soon, the other sheep were no longer in awe of her but afraid, and despite all she had done for them, she was unceremoniously cast out. For the first time, she regretted all she had done and grew resentful. It was then that she stumbled upon a human town. The buildings were aglow with the trappings of the solstice festival, and in her amazement, the lonely sheep forgot her rage. She walked through the streets in joy, as a human girl might.

Every soul that passed her was terrified. They looked upon her pitch-black wool, her coal hooves, and her fierce winter-cherry eyes, and they knew true fear. The villagers screamed in terror. They pelted her with stones and tried to drive her away.

The lamb remembered the herd that had driven her out in much the same way. Rage swelled within her breast. Letting out a feral howl, she smashed lantern after lantern and trampled the flowers the villagers had worked so hard to collect. She repelled the town guards as they tried to fight her off futilely, and she ate her fill of winter fruits from the town marketplace. She perpetrated every foul act she could conceive of in her fury, and just as she had finished and resolved to return to the forest, an unusual pair of men blocked her path.



“DO you think this little fluffo is the problem?”

The purple-haired man put his hand on his chin curiously. He was dressed from head to foot in flashy colors. The man beside him had silver hair and remained expressionless. His clothes were simple, and the solid black patterning made him almost indistinguishable from the darkness. He didn't move a muscle.

The sheep-monster glared at them, and the purple-hair man poked the latter.

“Aren't you listening to me, Harold?”

“What are you even doing here, Raphael?” the silver-headed man glared at him.

“Well, I was wandering around town, looking for a nice present for my darling Yulie, when this lamb showed up. What about you? Here to buy a fun little something for your squeeze?”

He pointedly looked away. “If this monster is bothering the townsfolk, we'd best deal with it quickly.”

Raphael pouted his lips. “Aw, c'mon, don't be so cold!”

Both men stepped forward, and the sheep felt the hostility they were emanating.

I just wanna go home!

“BAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

She couldn't bleat innocently if she wanted to in her current state, so she tried to scare them off. Lowering her crooked horns, she pawed at the ground.

The silver-haired man balled his fists, but before he could do anything else, she made her move.

Her hooves clacking off the cobblestones reached his ears only after she had sent her mana-infused body soaring through the air. As she prepared to land, she concentrated her mana into her horns, causing them to glow white with heat.

“What...?”

“It looks like this lamb has spunk!”

While in midair, she launched two spheres of rolling flames at the pair. They rapidly grew in both size and intensity as they flew, growing large enough to engulf them both with ease. She landed and charged towards them after the fireballs, but even then, neither man batted an eye.

Just as the fireballs reached the silver-haired man, he thrust out his leg in a sudden explosion of motion, generating a powerful gale. The frivolous man covered his perm with a sidelong frown, but both the fireballs had been dispersed by the wind. With only his raw strength, he had countered her magic—she could feel no mana in his movements. He had, however, left himself totally open to her horns.

“BAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHH!!”

She barreled towards him, cloven feet pounding the cobblestones, every thunderous step carving its mark. The man stepped out of her path, but the sheep ground to a halt, shaking the debris from her hooves as she turned and fired a bolt of lightning from her horns.

“You’re awfully talented for livestock,” he whispered calmly.

Despite his relaxed tone, he dodged the bolt and whipped around to her flank. He unleashed a second violent kick, this time making direct contact with her woolly flank.

“B-BAAAH...”

The blow nearly knocked her off her feet. She’d never experienced such an attack since her transformation—her fire and lightning had sent even the most ferocious beasts fleeing in terror on the mountaintops. She thought humans would be no different.

As she steeled herself for a second pass at the silver-haired man, his face was still utterly blank. There wasn’t so much as a drop of sweat on his brow, and his breathing was soft and regular. His eyes betrayed his only emotion—a frigid glare, one that threatened to pound her into submission should she dare defy him again. A chill ran down her spine, sweat pouring down her flanks beneath

her woolly armor.

If I look away, he'll eat me.

“What do you think you’re doing? How dare you hit a woman!”

Blinking, the sheep looked at the purple-haired man. He had a smug look on his face, as if he was confident the silver-haired man would protect him. The latter didn’t so much as glance in the playboy’s direction, however. It was clear he had no intention of protecting anyone.

“**BAAAAAAAAAHH!!**” she roared, changing her target to the defenseless one. She ran about to avoid the silver-haired man’s path, and as she leaped, she unleashed another thunderbolt.

“Oh? So you’re going to play with me now, Mary?”

“**B-BAA?**”

The silver-haired man didn’t move, just as she’d anticipated, and yet the purple-haired man was *smiling*. One look in his eyes told her that she had chosen poorly. The darkness within his soul was far deeper and more clinging than anything the silver-haired man could ever muster.

“No need to be so scared, now,” he chuckled playfully, as though to a pet.

The mana swirling around him was so thick, she could practically see it. He was powerful beyond her comprehension, and she knew her herd must have felt the exact same terror in her presence. The two men were out of her league—but it was already too late.

The purple-haired man extended a hand towards her, and she watched in shock as her thunderbolt was harmlessly absorbed into it.

“**BAA?!**”

Too startled to gauge her distance from the ground, she crashed clumsily into the cobblestones. The silver-haired man wasted no time picking her up by the back of her neck. To her surprise, the mana that had been coursing through her veins rapidly ebbed and faded away. All she could do was wave her legs in the air feebly and watch as the purple-haired man slowly drew closer.

This is it... I’m a goner.

She sniffled sadly. If she'd never eaten those bitter leaves, she'd still be with her family, not getting beaten up by these humans. The silver-haired man was feeling her back and stomach from behind, no doubt intent on eating her. She was passed to the purple-haired man, who held her up by the horns. She remembered a rumor that humans always decapitated their victims, and she knew her pitiful life was at its end.

"M-Meehh..." she bleated pitifully, realizing a moment later that her voice had changed altogether. "Meh?"

The man patted her curved horns affectionately. "There, all back to normal!"

"Shouldn't you release it?" the silver-headed one said coldly.

"Oh, stop worrying. This little sweetie can't hurt anyone now."

The odd weight that had filled her body rapidly faded away, and she realized with a start that her wool was back to its original snow white. Her mana was gone.

"Meeh...?"

"See?" the purple-haired one continued. "She used up all her mana fighting us. The poor thing probably ate a little mana source, that's all."

"...I suppose I should tell the guards we've dealt with the monster, then."

She barely understood what they were saying—her ability to understand human speech was fading as well. However, it was clear that neither man intended to hurt her. All that was left was to run. Just as running amok and waging war had struck her as so natural minutes earlier, beating a hasty retreat seemed the only option now.

The playboy set her down on the edge of town, and she moved to flee into the woods but stopped to look back at the pair one last time.

"See you later, Mary! Just don't go eating anything with mana in it again, okay?"

"Mehh!"

She could somehow tell they were talking to her, and although she hadn't the faintest clue what they said, she bolted into the woods and away from the

town.

She was now a normal sheep, one with a name meaning “bright and cheerful girl.” As she made her way back to her flock, she was overcome with joy at her rediscovered innocence.



HAROLD and Raphael were alone in town.

“Lord Raphael,” Harold said with a frosty look. “You used me as bait, didn’t you?”

“What did you expect? I’m more of a lover than a fighter.”

Given his sheer talent as a mage, Harold didn’t doubt he could’ve held his own just fine. Harold didn’t complain further—Raphael was not only older than him, but he also outranked him. One small word of complaint was enough.

“What about that name you gave it?” Harold said. “Mary, was it?”

“She’s not an *it*, she’s a charming young girl! And what could suit a beautiful girl better than a beautiful name?”

“You were planning on taking it in as a familiar, weren’t you?”

“If I did, there’d be no need to slay her.” Raphael waved an all-knowing finger at him with a lewd smile. “Besides, I saw you feeling her up. You enjoyed grabbing that wool, didn’t you?”

“...”

Harold had no words for such indecency. All he had was a glare that would be enough to kill lesser men.

“Well, I’d better get going,” Raphael continued cheerfully. “I still need to buy a present for Yulie.”

Harold raised an eyebrow, voice dripping with sarcasm. “What are you thinking of? A collar?”

“Oh? So you think she’d look charming in one, too? That settles it, then.”

“...”

Sarcasm was useless on him. He turned to leave but was struck with a horrific realization and stopped. Harold had come there to buy a present from the solstice festival for his fiancée. In other words, he would be heading back into the marketplace with Raphael—perhaps even to the same store.

I'll have to walk with him? The whole way?

Unfortunately, Raphael had already arrived at that same conclusion, and he was watching Harold in unmasked amusement.

Raphael waved at him coyly. "Come here. Don't leave me waiting, now!"

Perhaps that monster was the lucky one, after all.

Harold let out a sigh of resignation as he prayed the shopping trip would end quickly.

Afterword

IN early 2020, I became obsessed with villainess novels. I spent all my time reading them, and I got just enough sleep that my life didn't fall into shambles. It was clear what I had to write. I underwent intensive "image training." And yet, as soon as I started writing, I came across a critical error. Every villainess novel needs the prince to break off his engagement with the villainess over some contrived reason or another—but no matter how hard I tried, no matter what I did, I couldn't write that kind of prince for the life of me. His character just wasn't in me to write. But I wanted to write a villainess novel! No, I was going to, no matter what! I wracked my brain, and the conclusion I came across was that the prince had to secretly be a really nice guy. And so, this little tale was born.

Fortunately, the comments I received—whether they liked the plot, Vincent's work ethic or cringeworthy moments, or Elizabeth's angelic nature—made it so that the novel could get published like this. I've been writing for ten years now, even though I've never had the courage to make my works public before, let alone dream of publishing. Life can be funny sometimes.

Interestingly enough, in the original concept, the prince was supposed to be incredibly handsome and insightful, and he'd save his fiancée in clever ways from the shadows. The whole "head-over-heels" part of him won out, however, and Vincent became an awkward, lovestruck mess. When I finished the web novel, I even removed the bit about him being super strong from the description.

After all, the story hinges on Vincent's crush on Elizabeth. Without it, not only would it be a different tale altogether, but it probably wouldn't have been as popular as it is. Strange how things work out sometimes. One thing is clear, though: this novel was only possible due to everyone's love and kindness.

I have to thank Yukiko for pulling the character designs out of the chaos of my mind (especially Raphael—I could talk about him every day for the rest of my life, I swear), my editor Oda for reaching out to me and supporting me

throughout the entire process, everyone who's supported the story up to this point, and of course the staff of the site this story was originally posted on. Then, of course, there's you, the readers. Thank you for supporting me. You've made me and my characters very happy.

Now, I was planning on having this be the end of the story, but I'd feel too bad for Vincent if things ended here, so I'm working on the second part now. He'll be together with Elizabeth yet. The second part has been published in volume 2, so I'd be just as happy if we met there again!

Shakushineko

October 2020



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